

ADULT WARS, CHILD SOLDIERS

VOICES OF CHILDREN INVOLVED IN ARMED
CONFLICT IN THE EAST ASIA AND PACIFIC REGION



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East Asia and Pacific Region

C O N T E N T S

Chapter 1: This Study	7
Introduction	8
Methodology	10
Legal Standards to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers	12
Status of Ratification of Key International Treaties	14
Child Soldiers Map	15
 Chapter 2: Voices of Child Soldiers	 19
Section 1: How We Became Involved	23
"The militia threatened to kill me..."	24
"I was dragged out of my house..."	25
"I joined to serve the people..."	26
"I think soldiers are very beautiful..."	29
"I had no parents to look after me..."	30
"My parents couldn't afford to send me to school..."	31
Section 2: Our Experiences as Child Soldiers	35
"I had about two weeks of training..."	36
"Yes, I have heard of the Geneva Conventions..."	39

"Don't steal, don't talk to girls or have sex..."	41
"They ordered us to rape..."	43
"My jobs were to take care of security, cooking and carrying orders..."	44
"No, I'm not being paid..."	47
"Yes, we have doctors..."	50
"Kill or be killed..."	52
"It was a good experience for me..."	56
"A good age for youth to join the army is 18..."	58
Section 3: Coping with Our Pasts and Looking Ahead	63
"I have bad dreams of killing people..."	64
"Sometimes now I get very angry..."	66
"I want to become one of the successful people in life..."	67
 Chapter 3: Conclusion- Children Caught in the Crossfire of Adult Wars	 73
 Children Involved in Armed Conflict in EAP Case Studies Project: Guidelines for Case Studies	 76
Acknowledgments	81

Visna is registered in the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces as an adult soldier. He is 16 when interviewed in a remote area west of Battambang City. Being the youngest of three children, Visna's parents couldn't afford to send him to school. Instead, he helped his father fish. When Visna was 12 his father died. He was too small to fish as competently as his father had. It wasn't long before Visna saw himself a burden to his mother.

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Through village gossip, my mother learned an army officer was looking for an aide. When my mother suggested that I apply, I wasn't interested. But after a quarrel with her, I sought out the officer. I was recruited to be the man's bodyguard. I had no idea what the job would require.

When my commander went to the front, I went too. I was so frightened even though there were many soldiers near. I was given an AK47 to carry. Sometimes I was told to fire it, but I don't know if I ever shot anyone. My duties included cleaning guns, patrolling and cooking rice for my unit. I sent my salary to my mother through my brother.

I have seen several people killed in battles with Khmer Rouge soldiers. I remember the terror that grabbed me from out of the jungle where I could not see the enemy but could hear their voices. That fear sometimes visits me when I sleep at night. I also remember the weight of exhaustion from carrying weapons and equipment up and down the forested mountains where my unit was posted.

I had malaria several times and often have headaches and dizziness. My commander treats me well. He even gives me extra money each payday and I buy cakes for myself. Other soldiers aren't as kind. One man has beaten me several times, and I don't know why. Another man, no longer a soldier but who lives near the military camp, has threatened to kill me.

The nights are the worst. Sometimes I am too afraid to sleep. For when I sleep, I dream I am dead. In my dream, a soldier in uniform comes to find me. He is angry with me. I am arrested and taken away. The soldier questions me for along time. I say I don't know what I have done. No one listens to me. I see someone take a gun, and then they shoot me – not just once but three times... Is that called a dream or a nightmare?

”



UNICEF/EAPRO/Thierry Falise

CHAPTER I

THIS STUDY

I

INTRODUCTION

Not all child soldiers in East Asia and the Pacific have frightening dreams. Some say they never dream. All have endured hardship and violence and many have been deliberately exposed to extreme brutality in order to sever family and community ties. The long-term effects can be devastating. As one child explained, "What I saw in reality, how people were dead in those wars, haunts me."

The vast majority of children are forcibly recruited. But even when children have sought to join armed forces and groups, they all cannot be said to "volunteer". In many instances they are forced or coerced because of social or cultural pressure. Or they may join for economic reasons, because their families are too poor to provide them with food and education. Children surrounded by war and chaos may come to associate armed groups with power and protection. Or they may be motivated in response to injustices suffered by their families and communities. In some cases, they may see few alternatives. If they are unable to attend school and have no opportunities for vocational training, soldiering may seem to be the only option.

While the experiences of individual child soldiers in the East Asia and Pacific region are varied, the conflicts have some common features. They are often geographically localized, generally of low intensity and directly affect only a small proportion of the population. Many of the conflicts are rooted in ethnic or religious identities. The warring parties employ common strategies, including deliberate terror and threats against civilians. The use of children by these armed groups – as well as by some governments – is widespread.

Exactly how many children are being used as soldiers is difficult to determine. Many of the children are abducted or recruited by armed groups hiding in hills and jungles. Some of the children are used only periodically and regularly return to "normal" life in their villages. More often than not, children serving with armed groups are to be found in areas that are inaccessible or impossible to monitor.

Globally, it is estimated that, at any one time, around 300,000 children under the age of 18 are currently serving as child soldiers. Up to one fourth of these children can be found in the East Asia and Pacific region, and many more have served as soldiers in countries no longer facing

armed conflict. As children grow older, the destruction is perpetuated, and the promise and potential of each new generation is lost. This report is an effort to draw attention to the reality of child soldiers in this region, to demonstrate the need for our urgent response.

In these pages, current and former child soldiers express their ideas, thoughts, feelings and fears. It is a record of their voices, rather than a search for numbers. With this report, UNICEF seeks to raise awareness and shed light on the specific nature of child soldiering in the East Asia and Pacific region. By placing the issue on the agenda, the report will ultimately identify ways to reduce and end the involvement of children in these conflicts. Above all, it attempts to let the child soldiers "talk" to decision makers, child rights advocates, the media, youth leaders, military personnel and the general public.

As a qualitative evaluation of the problem of child soldiering in the East Asia and Pacific region, this study will also serve as a valuable resource for policy and programme planning by governments, inter-government and non-government organizations, as well as civil society. By documenting the experiences of children abducted or recruited by armed forces and groups, it provides powerful evidence that children should never be forced or, under any circumstance, permitted to trade their childhood for a uniform and a gun.

This study specifically addresses the following key questions:

- What is the family background of the children involved with armed groups?
- How did they become child soldiers?
- What did they experience as child soldiers?
- What do they experience as a consequence?
- What are their views and thoughts about the future?

For the purposes of this study, a child soldier is defined as anyone younger than 18 who has participated in armed forces or groups – either on a volunteer basis or by coercion – directly or in a supporting function. Participation includes fighting, guarding, cooking, or serving as a porter, messenger, spy or sex slave.

M E T H O D O L O G Y

This report is based on in-depth interviews with 69 current and former child soldiers in six countries in East Asia and the Pacific. Six children were interviewed in Cambodia, 13 in East Timor, 4 in Indonesia, 20 in Myanmar (on the Myanmar-Thailand border), 17 in Papua New Guinea (Bougainville) and 9 in the Philippines. While children from these conflict areas were selected for interviews, other conflicts in the region are also known to use children.

The number of children interviewed varies according to access and other security concerns. There is generally greater access to former child combatants in situations where conflicts have ended. However, post-conflict situations also pose problems because former child combatants who have returned to their villages often wish to maintain a low profile. Despite efforts to obtain official permission to interview young people in the army in Myanmar, no interviews could be conducted within the country's borders. Instead, child soldiers on the Myanmar-Thailand border were interviewed, among them some former child soldiers who had served in the government forces. The security situation in Indonesia, as well as time constraints, prevented researchers from conducting case studies in places other than the Malukus.

All the children interviewed became soldiers before the age of 18, with an average age for recruitment of 13 years. The youngest soldier interviewed was 11. The average age at the time of the interview was 18. Most of the boys and girls interviewed were associated with non-State entities, rather than regular government armed forces, because of difficulties in obtaining access to children serving with government forces. Slightly more than half of the interviewees are children in post-conflict situations (Cambodia, East Timor, Bougainville/PNG), who are no longer involved in armed conflict.

Only two girls were interviewed for this report, a sample too small to provide detailed information on girls involved with armed groups. Some information on female child soldiers, however, does emerge in interviews with boys, who comprise the majority of child soldiers in this region.

The interviews were mostly conducted by local consultants, though in some areas UNICEF staff interviewed the children. Most interviews were conducted in a local language and later translated into English. Tape recorders were rarely used, largely for fear of disturbing or intimidating the children being interviewed.

The interviews were semi-structured and followed a standard questionnaire. The interviewers were also provided with specific guidelines (annexed to this report). The questionnaire and the guidelines are largely based on material developed by Rachel Brett and Margaret McCallin in their study, *The Invisible Soldiers* (Radda Barnen, 1998). The same material has also been used in *No Childhood at All* (Images Asia, 1996), a study on child soldiers in the different conflicts in Myanmar.

Many of the children and young people interviewed openly agreed to have their names used, after being informed of the purpose and intention of the research. In the case of East Timor, the research was produced as a stand-alone document and real names were used. A few children preferred to give pseudonyms. In some cases, the children were so young that pseudonyms were assigned in order to protect their identity.

In this report, names are rarely used. Those presented here have been changed to protect the children and to maintain consistency. As much as possible the original statements of the boys and girls have been used, although the language and grammar have been edited for purposes of clarity, in part because the English skills of the different translators varied.

LEGAL STANDARDS TO STOP THE USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS

A number of key developments have taken place over the past decade, strengthening the protection of children in armed conflicts. In 1994, the United Nations Secretary-General asked Graça Machel, the former Minister of Education of Mozambique, to undertake a human rights assessment of children in armed conflict. When she released the Report on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children in 1996, she placed at the top of the list of demands "an urgent call to end the cynical exploitation of children as soldiers." One year later, as a result of the recommendations in the report, the UN Secretary-General appointed a Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict. The following year, in June 1998, the NGO Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers was established and initiated a public awareness campaign, stressing the importance of the adoption of an Optional Protocol that would prohibit the military recruitment of all children under the age of 18.

The entry into force of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, on 12 February 2002, is a milestone in strengthening the protection of children affected by armed conflict and helping to put an end to the use of children as soldiers. The Protocol outlaws the involvement of children under age 18 in hostilities, raising the previous standard of age 15, set by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions.

In addition to raising the minimum age for compulsory recruitment and direct participation in conflict to age 18, the Optional Protocol requires States parties to raise the minimum age for voluntary recruitment beyond the current minimum of 15. It also stipulates States parties to maintain strict safeguards to ensure that the recruitment is genuinely voluntary in case that voluntary recruitment below 18 is allowed. UNICEF joins other organizations, child rights advocates and NGOs in advocating a "straight 18 ban" on all recruitment, compulsory or voluntary and participation of children under 18 in hostilities. The Optional Protocol prohibits all recruitment below age 18 by non-government forces.

Eighteen is also the age limit for the use of child soldiers, according to the International Labour Organization Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (1999). It declares child soldiering an intolerable form of child labour and calls for an end to recruitment of children under 18 for use in armed conflicts. Another historic development has been the entry into force of the Rome Statute for the International Criminal Court, in July 2002, which makes the conscription, enlistment or use of children under 15 in hostilities a war crime.

Due to the customary status of the CRC ban on the recruitment and use of children under 15 in hostilities, this rule is binding on all States as well as non-State actors. In States that are signatories to the Optional Protocol, non-State entities are – clearly and simply – prohibited from recruiting or using any children under the age of 18.

The protection of civilians and children in times of armed conflict has been addressed on numerous occasions by the UN Security Council. Resolution 1261 (1999) "strongly condemns recruitment and use of children in armed conflict in violation of international law", while Resolution 1314 (2000) "requests the inclusion of provisions for the protection of children, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of child combatants in peace agreements". The targeting of civilians and children, as well as violations of humanitarian law and human rights law, including child rights, have also been characterized by the Security Council as potential threats to international peace and security. Another milestone is the list, called for in Security Council Resolution 1379 (2001), that will name warring parties that recruit or use children in violation of their international obligations.

Governments in East Asia and the Pacific have also made legal commitments to protect children during conflict, including obligations related to child soldiering. All States in the region are parties to the CRC and have thus committed themselves to adhere to and enforce the ban on recruitment and use of children under age 15. The Philippines and Viet Nam were among the front runners in the ratification of the Optional Protocol, whereas Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Mongolia, Nauru and Thailand have signed the Optional Protocol, thereby demonstrating their intention to ratify the instrument. The following table presents an overview of legal commitments undertaken by Governments, with respect to child soldiers.

Furthermore, a number of governments from this region participated in the Coalition to Stop the Use of Children as Child Soldiers' Asia and Pacific Regional Conference in Nepal in May 2000, to help prevent the future recruitment of children in the region. The Kathmandu Declaration on the Use of Children as Soldiers, which was adopted at the gathering, included strong support for the Optional Protocol. Delegates called on government armed forces and armed groups to immediately demobilize or release into safety all child soldiers and to tighten controls on the availability of small arms.

Also in 2000, the ASEAN Ministers responsible for Social Welfare in their respective countries issued a "Declaration on the Commitments for Children in ASEAN". Included in that statement were agreements to protect children from "all forms of violence" and from armed conflict.

Status of Ratification of Key International Treaties in the East Asia and Pacific Region

Country	2000 Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts	1998 Rome Statute on an International Criminal Court	1999 ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour	Attendees of the Asia and the Pacific Regional Conference on Child Soldiers
Cambodia	Signed 27 June 2000	Ratified 11 April 2002		Attended
China	Signed 15 March 2001			Attended
DPRK				Attended
East Timor				
Indonesia	Signed 24 September 2001		Ratified 28 March 2000	Attended
Lao PDR				
Malaysia			Ratified 10 November 2000	
Mongolia	Signed 12 November 2001	Ratified 11 April 2002	Ratified 26 February 2001	
Myanmar				
Pacific Islands Countries*				
Fiji		Ratified 29 November 1999	Ratified 17 April 2002	
Marshall Islands			Ratified 7 December 2000	
Nauru	Signed 8 September 2000	Ratified 12 November 2001		
Samoa		Signed 17 July 1998		
Solomon Islands			Signed 3 December 1998	
PNG			Ratified 2 June 2000	
Philippines	Ratified 12 April 2002	Signed 28 December 2000	Ratified 28 November 2000	Attended
Thailand		Signed 2 October 2000	Ratified 16 February 2001	Attended
Viet Nam	Ratified 20 December 2001		Ratified 19 December 2000	
TOTAL	2 State ratified, 5 States signed	5 States ratified, 4 States signed	9 States ratified, 1 State signed	1 State ratified, 4 States signed

*Several PIC countries have not ratified any of the above instruments and are not listed here, including: Cook Islands, Kiribati, Micronesia, Niue, Palau, Tokelau, Tonga Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Note that this chart only includes UNICEF-assisted countries in the region. The Philippine ratification of the 2000 optional protocol is pending the submission of the mandatory binding declaration.

Myanmar:
Although the minimum age for voluntary recruitment is 18, voluntary and forced recruitment of boys and girls younger than 18 continues both in the military, known as the *tatmadaw*, and in some of the ethnic opposition armies.

Indonesia:
The minimum age for both compulsory and voluntary recruitment is 18. There are few reports of under-18 children in government armed forces. However, militias supporting the Indonesian government in East Timor were known to recruit child soldiers. In addition, armed groups in Indonesia's troubled provinces are said to use child soldiers.

East Timor:
The minimum age for voluntary recruitment age is 18. Both pro-independence and pro-integration armed groups in East Timor involved children during the conflict, which culminated in 1999.

Cambodia:
The minimum age for voluntary recruitment is 18. There appears to be no new recruitment of children, although some soldiers, now over age 18 who were recruited as children during the Cambodian civil war, may still remain in the armed forces.

The Philippines:
The minimum age for both compulsory and voluntary recruitment is 18. However, children have been used as soldiers by armed opposition groups. There are no indications of under-18s in government armed forces, although under-18s have been reported in government-aligned paramilitaries and are admitted to military schools. There is strong legislation protecting children from military recruitment.

Papua New Guinea:
The minimum age for voluntary recruitment is 16, but children younger than 18 need parental consent. Children were used in the fighting in Bougainville.



Vasco is wiry and tall. He has black eyes, a long face and short straight black hair. He begins talking of his experiences in the pro-autonomy militia in a whisper, constantly looking for approval from the village headman. When answering difficult questions, he looks at the ground and puts his head to the wall with a pained expression creasing his face. Vasco, who was 16 when interviewed, was forced to join a militia for eight months when he was 14, prior to the referendum in 1999. He comes from a village where 144 families lived during the Indonesian occupation. Only 90 families live there now.

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The militia first came to my village in early January. ...they beat many people and killed some. They told us that if we did not join them we would die. When the militia came, my parents were very afraid and said to me, "If the militia ask you to do anything, just do it or they will kill us."

The first time they took me from my house, we had to rape a woman and then kill anything we could find, like animals and people. They ordered us to rape. We did this together. Everyday we were taken with them by car to burn houses, kill animals and harass people. Sometimes we were happy to burn the houses because the people in our group were enjoying themselves. But other times I felt that it was not good to burn the house and to hurt these people. If we didn't do this, we would die. Everyday they came to get us and if we didn't want to go, they would threaten us with machetes. They beat me with a piece of wood everyday. The first time they beat me was the most difficult.

They killed many people but I don't know where they put the bodies. They screamed and shouted when they had killed people and showed off their machetes covered with blood and said, "Eat the people." There was so much blood. They drank alcohol made from palm like tuak and tuasabo and they ate angin gila [amphetamines]. I did not drink or take any tablets.

They gave us training in how to use guns and knives and how to attack and how to kill. An East Timorese militiaman was our teacher. We were also trained by the Indonesian military. Every week we were trained twice for two hours. They never talked about human rights – they only told us how to rape, steal and kill. They didn't teach me anything good.

I was very sad and I cried when they killed people and raped people. If I cried in front of them I would die. I would only cry in my home. I had bad dreams and I woke up thinking that somebody wanted to kill me. Now I wake up still from bad dreams. I don't remember my dreams, but I feel afraid when I wake up. I am still constantly afraid.

”

2



CHAPTER 2

VOICES OF CHILD SOLDIERS

In this chapter, 69 people from different countries in East Asia and the Pacific tell us about their experiences as child soldiers. Some of them are still carrying arms and actively participating in hostilities. Others have laid down their weapons and returned to their villages. Their stories tell how they became involved in armed conflict and what they experienced during their time as child soldiers, their fears and nightmares and their hopes for the future.

At the time they were interviewed the soldiers and former soldiers were between 11 and 31 years old, with an average age of 18. The people from Cambodia, East Timor and Bougainville/PNG, comprising about half of the total, were interviewed after conflict had ended. A majority was serving with armed groups other than the national armies. This ratio is also influenced by the fact that it is more difficult to interview child soldiers serving with government forces.

The children were recruited at various stages of their young lives. The youngest soldier was forcibly recruited at the age of 7. As many as 34 percent were recruited at age 12 or younger, while the average age of recruitment was 13 years. Based on the evidence gathered in these interviews, children from age 12 to 14 are most vulnerable to recruitment.

Among the 69 current and former child soldiers selected for interviews, only two were girls. This is not a reflection of the actual ratio between boys and girls involved with armed groups in the region. Based on the experiences related by the children, it appears that, while boys are in the majority, many girls are also being used both as fighters and for other functions, including for sexual purposes.

Most of the children indicated that they served as combatants (91 per cent), whereas the rest mainly functioned as porters. According to the children, 57 per cent of the children had volunteered and 24 per cent stated they were forced or coerced to join. It is unclear whether the remainder - 19 per cent - were recruited voluntarily, or if there was some coercion or threats involved, as they only indicated that they were "encouraged" or simply "recruited".

The children interviewed had, on an average, only four years of schooling prior to recruitment. Child soldiers from Cambodia and Myanmar had only attended school for an average of 1.3 and 1.9 years, respectively. Almost 60 per cent of those interviewed came from a family of subsistence farmers living in or very near to conflict areas. Six boys were orphaned and two were abandoned by their parents and left to live with relatives. The interviews indicate that parents were aware of the fact that their children were serving as soldiers in half of the cases.



Saw Aung was 7 years old and working on his family's farm during the summer school break with two cousins, ages 6 and 8, when they were taken away by Burmese soldiers. Saw Aung, whose father is Burman and mother Karen, has not seen his family since. He was interviewed when he was 17 and living in a Karenni refugee camp, after having escaped from the Myanmar army.

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About 10 Burmese soldiers in uniform with guns came and said, "Come with us." "No, we are very young."

"No, follow us," they said, "We will give you food, candy." We were young, we couldn't think much. We traveled by motorboat for three nights. When we reached the recruitment center in Rangoon, we talked with others about how they had come there – their parents had kicked them out of the house and they didn't know where to go. Like us, they were forced or kidnapped with promises of food and candy. The center was called Ye Nunt. We were very, very afraid about what we were going to tell our parents. I tried to communicate through letters. I stayed in Ye Nyunt for five years. We were told we couldn't go back home and that we would have to stay there. They threatened us to keep us from escaping. Some escaped and were sent to prison. Some were beaten. Some committed suicide. I know of five. One person drowned by driving a truck into a river.

One jumped from a high building. Most were forced or tricked to join and always wanted to go home. They were very frustrated.

The only way out was to kill themselves. We were children. We wanted to play, have fun or work with our parents.

I was very depressed. I stayed in the barracks. Of course I wanted an education. I'm illiterate now. I can only write my name.

Within the camp, you don't want to go to school. I took care of the pigs. You could work at the fishpond, raise chickens, breed livestock. You could do any of these things but you couldn't go home. Some of the officers were nice. Some kicked us; they'd lose patience if you kept crying.

A child crying a lot and not taking orders was sent to prison. The barracks were very long. As far as you could see there were kids.

Some stayed only one or two years in the barracks.

I felt I had no freedom. We were never allowed to go and see our parents. Finally, I decided to flee. I'm very bitter about the Burmese army. I haven't been able to see my parents or my sisters and brother. After I escaped, the Army told my parents I had died in the fighting. I have bad dreams but not frequently. Sometimes I am being killed, sometimes I'm being tortured but not killed.

Sometimes I dream I get to finally meet my parents but they're sick.

Sometimes my anger is so big. I'm trying to be happy with friends. I drink a little alcohol now. I still want to take revenge because I'm separated from my family. I want to give them the same suffering I have had. One day...if I get a chance...I will do something for all the people sharing the same suffering. If I hadn't been taken by the soldiers, I'd be living with my parents happily, warmly. I'd be educated. It's what I want.

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Most children in this region who join armed forces or groups are forcibly recruited. When it comes to the recruitment of child soldiers, however, "forced" does not only refer to abduction or the use of physical force. It also includes situations that involve the threat of force or coercion. Young people in this study talked about joining military groups out of fear of injury or death. In some cases, the military or militia made direct threats to kill the children or their families if they did not join.

Most experts on child soldiers are of the opinion that even if children present themselves for military services – whether regular or irregular forces – it is misleading to call such recruitment "voluntary". There are economic, cultural, social or political factors that pressure children to become child soldiers. Children living in the midst of violence, with a constant fear of being attacked and killed, might seek protection by joining armed forces or groups. Threats of death, abuse, torture and/or imprisonment can also provoke young people to join the opposite side in the conflict. These factors and circumstances can leave parents and young people with no real alternative.

In this study, many children, especially those serving with a non-state warring party, said they were fighting for a cause. They spoke of joining to fight violence or oppression against their families, people, religion or culture. Like adults, children can also identify with a cause and choose to take up arms in support of it. Unlike adults, however, children cannot be expected to distinguish between competing causes and often have unrealistic expectations of what a soldier's life involves. Children are also more impressionable and thus more likely to be influenced by the rhetoric of military recruiters.

SECTION 1

HOW WE BECAME INVOLVED

"THE MILITIA THREATENED TO KILL ME..."

Forced recruitment of children into armed forces or groups includes the use of physical force, as well as the use of coercion, threats and social or cultural pressures.

Children spoke of the military or militia making direct threats to kill them or their families if they did not join.

Some boys described tense moments when militia members held a machete to their neck or guns to their head and told them to join the militia. Two were pushed into the militia by their fathers, who feared the whole family would be murdered if they did not cooperate.

In Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, young boys were made to feel they had to choose sides once the government troops took up positions on the island. Anyone who refused to take sides during the crisis for independence was taken as a spy. And spies were killed.

The militia threatened to kill me if I didn't join them – that's why I became involved with them. They came armed with guns when I was at home. The leader of the Sakunar told us that all the young people had to be involved in the militia and if they refused they would be shot. I obeyed their instructions because I was afraid to die. Their instructions were that we had to burn houses because the owners were from pro-independence groups. [East Timor – joined when he was 17, now 18]

I was not forced to become a porter, but my family was told that if they refused I would be sent to the frontline. [Cambodia – joined when he was 10, now 14]

In 1995, I was told to look after people in the care center at night. I was 14 and I was frightened of the BRA. I had to support the side of the Government. In my mind I supported the BRA. But I was frightened of the PNG defense force. They would just kill when they suspected anyone. The resistance forces came to our house – it's the price when you stay at home. They said, "The soldiers will kill you." In the care center, you have to be in support of the government; if you are in the bush, you are in the BRA. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 14, now 18]

They went from house to house and when they found people who had helped the Falintil, they beat them. Later they came to my house and threatened my parents. My father was very scared and he asked me to join them, otherwise they would kill all of us. Then they forced all people in the village to join them. My father was very old so they didn't force him to join. I was paid once; when I first joined the militia I got 25,000 rupiahs [about \$3]. [East Timor – joined when he was 17, now 18]

A group of soldiers knocked loudly on the door. Five others, all about the same age, did not escape and were taken by the soldiers. I was crying. I was dragged out of my house and put on a boat and taken to Rangoon. I was considered an adult. [Myanmar – joined when he was 9, now 21]

I remember the day that a commander came to my schoolroom and told the teacher they needed people to transport weapons. All the children were told to report for duty the next day. Many were very scared, but they knew that if they refused to go they would be sent to the frontline. We were terrified of landmines. The paths up the mountain were littered with them. It was difficult to concentrate both on carrying huge shells and watching out for mines. [Cambodia – age of recruitment not known, now 16]

I was arrested on the way back home from school. I was 14. The Sergeant asked me, "Will you go with me?" I said no. But he took me. He took me to the recruitment center and just left me. [Myanmar – joined when he was 14, now 15]

" I WAS DRAGGED OUT OF MY HOUSE ... "

Organized forced recruitment and abduction were reported in two countries.

Children living in urban areas and attending school are less vulnerable to recruitment. The only urban children interviewed for this study were systematically abducted or coerced to join armed forces or groups.

Children in urban areas who are living on the street are very vulnerable to forced recruitment and they reported being "picked up" and sent away for military training.

Some young people reported that they were arrested for not having an identity card. Given an option of prison or the military, they decided to fight. Others were forcibly removed from their houses, off a bus or abducted while walking home.

" I JOINED TO SERVE THE PEOPLE ... "

Many of the boys and girls interviewed spoke of having witnessed violence and oppression. Many had seen their home or village destroyed, or were forced to relocate with their families to other communities.

Most had witnessed the beating and sometimes murder of a family member or a fellow villager. These experiences provoked, in some, a desire to join the resistance.

Some children associated arms and uniforms with a sense of power – invoking fear and/or respect. A number of children also indicated that, in the midst of war, the military came to represent security and protection.

I joined to serve the people in the mountains. We protected them from violence and harm, from the government soldiers. These soldiers, they were abusive; that's why we kept watch. That was how we helped the people in the mountains. [Philippines – joined when he was 14, now 16]

Realistically, if the enemy is approaching and destroying your community, how can you stand back? ...Sometimes people were exploiting us...I want to save my island and my people....I have five brothers. Four joined the fighting, three joined before me. I want to defend my island and my people. My parents supported me. They know it's the right thing. If people don't join, there wouldn't be anyone to guard the families. My parents know our island is our life. ...The reason for going with the BRA was for a common goal. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 17, now 25]

I joined the [group] on 19 January 1999 because my community was slaughtered in an inhumane fashion. I fought as a volunteer without being forced by anyone because I cannot bear to see my community slaughtered like that. [Indonesia – joined when he was 16, now 17]

The enemy is oppressing us. ...I feel it's not good, these soldiers. From my grandmother/grandfather's time and my father's lifetime and to our time, they have beaten our people. We feel it's no good. I think about my mother and father, and the village burned down, and the stories my parents tell about other people, that is why I came to the soldier's camp. [Myanmar – joined when he was 15, now 16]

I joined a clandestine network when I was 17 years old. I thought that, as a Timorese, I had to become a member if I wanted to get what I wanted for my future. The reason why I enlisted in Falintil was because Falintil had suffered for the people and I thought that I should make sacrifices for them too. [East Timor – joined when he was 17, now 19]

Many women joined the clandestine movement because they were searching for the right way to help their country and to get independence. ...there were more women than there were men. This was because when we called men to join us they were afraid. Even though we were youth, we gathered together to discuss independence and self-determination. We discussed how we could live in peace and respect each other so that the youth would understand how to love each other. [East Timor – joined when she was 15, now 19]

I wanted to be a soldier in the BRA so that I could own a gun and protect Bougainville from outsiders. And to kill PNGCDF security. When the soldiers came and occupied Bougainville, they were killing many people. The riot squad was destroying and burning villages. We wanted to retaliate. I didn't think it would last long. I was thinking when we wipe out the enemy, the fighting would be over. Those who joined did on their own decision. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 14, now 27]

Young people join the MILF because it is obligatory for them. They feel happy because they meet new friends from everywhere. [Philippines – joined when he was 16, now 19]

I joined the army four years ago when I was 12 years old. I was recruited by the Ustadz [the one who leads prayers at the mosque] in my community. I was told that the military/government was the enemy of the Muslims. I got to know Ustadz Yusuf when he attended the prayers in the mosque. I knew the Ustadz for almost a month or more. I was recruited in my municipality. The Ustadz asked me to join the jihad. I became a soldier voluntarily. [Philippines – joined when he was 12, now 16]

Four of the conflicts in this report involved occupation by an external military force. The people living in occupied territories often felt their lives, families, property and culture were threatened. In some cases, the abuse and terror directed at their communities drove young people to join armed opposition groups.

Children who belong to an ethnic or religious minority that employs violence are especially vulnerable to social and cultural pressures. Their entire socialization may be defined around a perceived responsibility to carry on the struggle for freedom or to defend their people and their land. This process is often reinforced by influential institutions, such as the local church or mosque.

Several ethnic armies engaged in the fight for autonomy in the East Asia and Pacific region have, at times, demanded that villagers, particularly young children, join their forces. A number of those armed groups are now disbanded or engaged in ceasefire agreements.

Many admitted that their parents would not allow them to become soldiers and they had run away from home to join an armed group.

One boy talked of a desire for revenge after the murder of his father by government soldiers. Later, after fighting and being injured, he learned his father had, in fact, been executed by the rebels he had joined.

Why do I feel angry, why did I join the BRA to fight? They killed my brother and uncle (an old man) when they went [to the fields]. They all the time came around to shoot and so we got angry. We want to go and make payback with them, remove them from our area. I discussed [joining the BRA] with my parents. They tried to stop me, but I was too determined. They realized if I stayed in the village, I would be affected, that I might be killed. They were worried about me staying there and finally said, okay, I can go. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was about 9, now 19]

I joined the movement to avenge my father's death in the hands of the military. When I was seven years old, I saw the military take away my defenseless father from our house. My father was a member of the movement but was always drinking with his military and CFQU friends so the NPA was led to suspect that my father was supplying the military with information. But I saw the military take away my father so I joined my grandfather who went to the mountains to join the movement. [Philippines – joined when he was 7, now 15]

" I THINK SOLDIERS ARE VERY BEAUTIFUL ... "

I left home in 1992 and traveled to the border, to a school in a Karenni village, with about 10 friends. I just wanted to be a soldier. I was attracted by the Karenni soldiers when I saw them in the village. I think soldiers are very beautiful. It makes me want to join the army. [Myanmar – joined when he was 14, now 20]

I volunteered to join with my big brother. He was about 20. Another brother joined in 1994. My parents tried to stop me. They said, "You're too small." I had dropped out of school at Grade 5. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 8, now 20]

My cousin was a Section commander. He asked me to help him as a bodyguard. He taught me how to use a gun – I had a home-made rifle. I was the first kid I knew to join the BRA. I was happy he asked me and happy I'd be joining the force. I didn't have a second thought about it. I could not have said no. I had trust in him, he was a family member and it gave me confidence. ...He needed a close relative; he couldn't use someone from another clan. There could be problems. [For example,] if I am killed, the commander would be responsible, would be blamed. Within the same family, that could easily be resolved. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 12, now 21]

When I stopped studying, I started hanging out with some boys. My parents told me, "Do not hang around with them because you might get involved with what they were doing. You might end up doing something bad." ...Then one day I heard someone say, "Who wants to join us in the mountains? Come with us, this will be for your own good so that you won't do something bad." I thought about it and told myself, "Since I wasn't doing anything because I didn't have a job and I wasn't studying, I will just join them so that I could avoid doing bad things."There were also other children [who joined]. The children joined because their parents wanted them to. These were children who weren't doing anything. Their parents said, "Go to the mountains instead because that is better." [Philippines – joined when he was 13, current age not known]

Young boys spoke of joining an older brother or relative already belonging to armed forces or groups. This kind of glorification of warfare is known to exist in many situations.

The interviewers often described a no-way-out situation, where their involvement in armed forces or groups was "expected" by family and members.

Due to the lack of opportunities, especially in terms of education and employment, several parents pushed their children to join an armed group.

" I HAD NO PARENTS TO LOOK AFTER ME ... "

While only a few of the boys and girls interviewed were orphans themselves, several made references to the situation of orphans in armed forces or groups. They spoke of orphans being taken in or finding their way to an armed group, in search of protection and a sense of belonging. (It should be noted that in Asia, a child with only one parent is often considered an orphan.)

Three young people said their parents had abandoned them when they were young. They felt their lives did not have value and so they were willing to endure the risks associated with a soldier's life. Three others spoke of mistreatment and violence at home.

Neglect and abuse at the hands of stepparents is not uncommon and can be a key contributing factor to children leaving home and joining the military.

I was 14 when I joined the NPA. I was out of school then. My grandfather and grandmother sent me to school but I did not take my studies seriously. I had a friend who joined the movement. I thought that my life was meaningless because I had no parents to look after me. I went along with [my friend] because I thought what the heck - my life was meaningless anyway. [Philippines - joined when he was 14, now 16]

Many of the other children in the militia were orphans, from broken homes. Those who didn't attend school and those who were involved in gambling rings. [East Timor - joined when he was 16, now 17]

My father was shot dead by the Indonesian military when I was 12 years old and that is when I went to join Falintil. They accepted me to join because there was no other place for me to run [his mother had died earlier] and the only choice was to join Falintil and fight. [East Timor - joined when he was 12, now 28]

My father died when I was a year old. My stepfather had other children from his first wife and he bought clothes for them. I had nothing. [My stepfather started beating my mother] I couldn't do anything to stop my stepfather because I was just a kid. But he stopped beating Mama when he learned that I joined the NPA. Maybe he got scared. ...If I ever hear that he's hurting Mama again, I'll beat him and kill him. [Philippines - joined when she was 13, now 16]

My mother married again after she divorced with my father. My stepfather said to me, "My marriage with your mother is not for feeding you." I went to live in a monastery. I was five years old. When I was 13 I went to live with an uncle in another town outside of Rangoon and worked for about a year in a teashop. I tried to return to my mother's house, but she and her husband had moved to another town without letting me know. [Myanmar - joined when he was 16, now 17]

" MY PARENTS COULDN'T AFFORD TO SEND ME TO SCHOOL... "

My parents couldn't afford to send me to school. There wasn't one in our village. It was about 40 miles away. Our village was burned down in 1997. My father was arrested and jailed for three Status of Ratification of Key International Treaties in the East Asia and Pacific Region months. He was the head of the village. They said nothing about why he was arrested. [Myanmar – joined when he was 15/16, now 18]

It was difficult to get jobs in the area [where I lived]. People trade jade. They take it to the border to sell. My mother had to mine the jade in a secret way because the soldiers want to buy it very cheap. My mother worked in a stream digging for the jade...in the nighttime. [Myanmar – joined when he was 12, now 24]

Being the youngest of three children, my family couldn't afford to send me to school. [Cambodia – joined when he was 12, now 16]

I send most of the money I am paid each month back home. To this day I have never admitted to my family that I am in the army – I am too afraid that they would force me to return home. How would I provide for them? [Cambodia – joined when he was 13, now 17]

In some instances children say they "volunteered" to join armed forces or groups, but their stories reveal a lack of other opportunities. Armed forces are often viewed as the only alternative for the children in families who cannot afford to care for them.

Nearly all the children came from families that survived by engaging in subsistence level farming, or other impoverished economic situations. Six boys explicitly mentioned poverty as a factor influencing them to join the army or an armed group.

Education is an important factor to consider when looking at the reasons why children join armed groups. During armed conflict, when schools are closed or burned down by the military or militia, children are robbed of their right to an education. Children who are not attending school are much more vulnerable to forced recruitment.

Several boys and one of the girls interviewed – representing nearly every country – said they had dropped out of school and were just hanging around their communities with little to do at the time they were recruited.

A few said they were lured into armed groups by the promise of payment, though these promises proved false.



Hasan comes from a village in northern Ambon Island. A Muslim, he joined a local militia-styled group called Jihad when he was 16. He was 17 when interviewed and, although living at home, he was still part of Jihad.

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I am from a happy family. We live together and love each other. I have three brothers and one sister. I am now in the third year of senior high school. What I think is that I have to achieve the very best for my future, my religion, my community and even my beloved family. My group is fighting against the group that wants to separate themselves from the country or to establish a country within the country. They are the separatists who want to establish their own nation and they have insulted the dignity of my community and religion. We have to eliminate them from our beloved country. What they do is against religion and the nation.

I joined the group on 19 January 1999 because my community was slaughtered in an inhumane fashion and I fought as a volunteer without being forced by anyone because I could not bear to see my community slaughtered like that. Many children have lost their parents, quit school because school facilities were destroyed, and many children are abandoned.

After I joined, I had training twice a week; they trained us how to fight and how to face the enemy. Yes, [this training] is very beneficial because it is also useful for me. Yes, I do continue my schooling because education is very important for my future and the group, in general. The group's work is physical while education is for the brain, so I have to continue education. I do training as a Mujahidin, that's all. The job that I like the most is to make calligraphy. They gave us a long white flowing robe. That is enough. I sleep in burned-out houses. Thank God the surroundings are quite safe, clean and quite comfortable. I have never been paid.

Our seniors treat me very well and respectfully, but if I did something wrong, I would be reprimanded so that it would not happen again.

At first I was revolted, scared seeing others die. But as time went on, I have gotten used to it, and bit by bit the feeling of being scared has disappeared. During the incident at Pattimura University I saw someone taken and beaten by a crowd. They took his gun and shot him in his head. I am scared on the battlefield. I am afraid that I will get killed. Yes, I have cried. Regarding killing, I have killed once. During the Tantui incident, someone tried to infiltrate to explode a bomb. When I got out, there were some people yelling, and the man was caught so I cut his head off.

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SECTION 2

OUR EXPERIENCES AS CHILD SOLDIERS

In this section, children answer questions about their experiences as child soldiers. More specifically, the children talk about what kind of training they received; how they were treated; how their basic needs – for food, personal hygiene and health care – were met; what duties they were assigned; whether they took part in combat; and to what extent they were informed about the laws of war and international human rights, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The experiences of the children vary widely. Clearly, armed forces and groups have very different practices when it comes to recruiting children and preparing the children for life in the fighting ranks. Many children say that they had or are having an uneventful, almost easy-going service. Some children are sent into combat, but not all child soldiers experience fighting on the frontlines. In some cases, boys and girls are assigned tasks in base camp or they act as sentries, porters or spies. Some children have been severely traumatized and are finding difficulties in coping with their experiences.

This section raises two very difficult dilemmas:

First, this study aims to raise awareness of the conditions child soldiers endure. Providing their rationale for fighting and the details of their experiences could be construed as acceptance or a call to improve those conditions. That is not our intent. The standards for recruitment of children as soldiers are very clear in international law, and advocacy must continue for raising the age of both voluntary and compulsory recruitment to 18.

Second, some children speak positively about their experiences. Presenting their perspective could be seen as an approval of children as soldiers. Child soldiering is damaging to all children. It is important to recognize that not all children want to be demobilized. The reasons for not wanting to be demobilized need to be understood and should not hinder efforts to advocate for and take action to demobilize children in accordance with the best interests of the child.

Nearly all of the children interviewed were given a gun or a machete and served in armed groups or in an army as a combatant. Some of the children told how they were made to terrorize and rape community members, destroy houses and kill animals. Of the 46 children who had been involved in some form of armed combat, 18 were certain they had killed at least one person. One boy claimed to have killed five people when he was 12 years old. Some children spoke of witnessing the murder of family members and civilians, and one boy recalled leading his militia group to his uncle, who was then murdered.

" I HAD ABOUT TWO WEEKS OF TRAINING ... "

It is clear from the interviews that some form of training was given to most of the boys and girls. But many of the children did not feel that they were physically or technically prepared for combat.

For children who had no training, first-hand experience was their only teacher, and they learned as they went along. While all children were expected to gain from experience, in some conflicts this type of "on-the-job training" seems to have been the main strategy for teaching boys and girls.

In some situations, recruits were sent out on patrols with no prior training or instruction about guns, tactics or the area. But many of the young fighters who said they received no formal training were at least shown how to shoot and clean a gun.

My parents tried to stop me. They said I was too young to join. I wanted to join. I never had shot a gun before. I had about two weeks of training. We were resting when the camp was ambushed. I fired at them... [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 7 or 8, now 18]

There were about 250 people in the training. About 120 were younger than 18. About 50 were younger than me. [Myanmar – joined when he was 16, now 17]

The younger ones had lighter training than the older ones. And the young were never asked to guard. [He remembers some of the young ones crying, some were afraid. The trainers were supportive, he recalls, talking with the boys, trying to work out the problems and give them encouragement.] They tried to make them happy. One of the young ones quit. He was tired. [Myanmar – joined when he was 14, now 20]

I had training twice a week; they trained us how to fight and how to face the enemy. [Indonesia – joined when he was 16, now 17]

We have training in phases. The first phase is 15 days of lectures on how to ambush, harass and fight. [Philippines – joined when he was 16, now 19]

When I arrived at Camp Abubakar, I was given an Armalite. I was trained by Ustadz Yusuf, [who reads prayers in the mosque] who also served as our commander. When I knew how to shoot and handle guns, I was allowed to fight. I was trained the moment I arrived. We had shooting exercises and had a physical fitness programme. For 45 days we had a daily training programme. I had duties like looking after the carabaos or had post duties/look-out. [Philippines – joined when he was 12, now 16]

I had three months complete training. [Philippines – joined when he was 17, now 26]

Recruits were supposed to study and train for six months. I was transferred to another unit and I didn't get to attend the course. My stepsister completed the six months training. I was told to wait. There were documents about our country that I was meant to read. My problem was that I could not read that well. I wasn't even through grade school. But I tried to listen to what they were explaining. There were study sessions every night from 6 to around 10:30 while a squad was standing guard. [Philippines – joined when she was 13, now 16]

I was 14 years old at that time but because of the responsibility I had been given to hold a gun I quickly became more adult. I started to think carefully about military strategy and tactics and about how to kill and take the enemy's guns to protect us. When I went to battle for the first time, that was my first training. [East Timor – joined when he was 12, now 28]

It was on-the-job training. Some retired soldiers in the village gave me a crash course [before I left]. They told me how to take cover. [We learned] by ambushing. The first time I was very frightened. Three months after joining, I was in my first ambush. ...The BRA used ambush strategies for getting guns...[Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 14, now 27]

I carried an Armalite, an M16. I was trained on how to use a gun, how to fire it, how to dismantle and assemble it. That was the training I received. The training included hopping over rocks, crawling, rolling. That was for three weeks. [Philippines – joined when he was 14, now 16]

We had no training. No instruction about the care of prisoners. Before the crisis, we had seen some Hollywood war movies about the American war in Viet Nam. Soldiers took Vietnamese prisoners. That was our only experience of what to do. In some scenes we saw soldiers capture someone and beat him. In our case, when we captured the resistance fighters we did not beat them. After their care and protection in the camps, some decided to join the BRA. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 17, now 26]

It was the No. 3 training school. [The training lasted] four months and two weeks. First, they taught

The most basic type of training is a couple of weeks long and includes drills and shooting instruction. It does not teach skills but rather provides basic knowledge of how to use a gun and instils basic discipline.

There is also ad-hoc phased training through which children are briefly trained at the start, and as they get more practical experience, undergo more detailed training.

Some groups or armies provided more extensive training during which children were actually sent off to a training site to get in-depth training at the start of their recruitment. This training often included not only drills and weapons instruction, but also political indoctrination.

Children who underwent extensive training had varying experiences. Some children were unable to bear the abusive treatment and tried to escape, despite the very real threat of harsh punishment if they were caught. They also reported conditions so intolerable that a number of children who were recruited committed suicide.

Several children believed that they had received good training and that the skills they learned as child soldiers would be applicable in civilian life.

Clearly, the lack of training – or the ad hoc manner in which it is carried out – often makes child soldiers more vulnerable to being wounded in combat.

parade. After 10 weeks they issued an AK47 to me. After they were issued the guns, three or four young people committed suicide. [Myanmar – joined when he was 16, now 17]

Yes, I saw [other young boys crying]. The trainers beat them to stop crying. These young boys asked to the trainers to give leave to see their parents. As they were not allowed, they cried and they committed suicide, shot themselves dead. I saw it once. I saw when he shot himself. I buried him. [Myanmar – joined when he was 16, now 17]

I started to act like a man who could be a good fighter even though I was only 14 years old. I didn't have any military training – the only training that I had was how to clean guns, take them apart and put them back together. The only thing that I heard from Falintil about fighting was "if you see enemy, you shoot him. If you don't shoot him, you will be killed." [East Timor – joined when he was 14, now 31]

I was given one week of [advice] – they taught me to shoot, to make a gun, to use grenade, to make ambush. They had to share guns in the section. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 10, now 19]

There was no formal training. If we were needed in combat, we were just told to shoot. [Philippines – joined when he was 14, now 16]

[Do more children die than the senior members?] Yes, because the senior members have been trained while the children have not received special training. [Indonesia – joined when he was 16, now 17]

"YES, I HAVE HEARD OF THE GENEVA CONVENTIONS..."

Yes, I have heard of the Geneva Convention. We take care of our enemies the way we take care of ourselves to make them feel that the MILF is humanitarian. [Philippines – joined when he was 16, now 19]

Yes, I know what [human rights are]. It's the right to live, since once a human being is born, the first and foremost thing is life. [Indonesia – joined when he was 16, now 17]

We had classes in training discipline that contained some discussion about human rights and politics. [East Timor – joined when he was 14, now 19]

The good things that I learned from Falintil were discipline, administration and also politics. I learned about human rights from documents that we received from the church and also from the leaders because they talked a lot about human rights. [East Timor – joined when he was 12, now 28]

Our commander always talked about human rights when we had meetings – he always spoke to us of the need to protect the people, not to kill and beat the people. [East Timor – joined when he was 15, now 19]

Human rights are like the right to defend one's homeland. Therefore, as a child of Indonesia, I am entitled to defend my country and my place of residence. [I never learned how to treat the enemy] because I would like to kill [them] and not be touched. Because according to my leader, these separatists are sadistic and never act in a humane way. So, my principle is I should kill them before they kill me. But I would not like to torture someone since he is also human. [Indonesia – joined when he was 16, now 17]

The good thing that I learned from Falintil was about discipline. For example, the discipline of how to live under military command and how to respect each other. The commander always treated us well; for example, he taught me the right way and wrong way for soldiers to behave toward the people. [East Timor – joined when he was 17, now 19]

According to our commanders, when we capture an enemy, we must kill them immediately if they resist. But if they will surrender, we will give them a chance since they might embrace Islam. [Philippines – joined when he was 16, now 19]

The interviewees were asked specific questions about their knowledge of laws of war and human rights. Surprisingly, quite a number of recruits had been exposed to such issues. However, from the statements they made it appears that most had been able to absorb or retain very little of substance on these subjects.

In addition, the children's understanding of the meaning of human rights was very uneven. Many thought that human rights exist to protect oneself, not others.

Nevertheless, there were child soldiers who seemed to have understood some of the basic concepts of human rights. Several boys and girls made reference to religion incorporating key human rights values, which seemed to indicate that religion can be an entry point for understanding human rights and the laws of war.

Some recruits said they had been told about human rights and mentioned a certain booklet, which had been handed out by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in training workshops. The influence of this suggests the possibility that similar child rights training might have a positive impact. It should be noted that this training material would be for adults.

Although there was some mention of the treatment of civilians during the interviews, it was insufficient to make any conclusion as to whether or not child soldiers think that civilians are in need of special protection and need to be seen as clearly distinct from armed groups.

When children spoke of how civilians were treated, there were both good and bad examples. There were reports of extensive violence against civilians – looting and burning. A few children said they had been given orders they thought were wrong or difficult to obey. At the same time, other children reported that assistance and protection by armed forces and groups had been extended to civilian populations.

The children reported troubling memories. Several reported that conduct toward or treatment of others was far more brutal than they had anticipated.

If the BRA suspected a villager was helping the PNG forces, they put them under surveillance or isolated them or relocated to areas where they couldn't move much. They would be interrogated, whipped with a bush cane to make them talk. We would beat them and later when they could talk, whip them again. About five times like this...sometimes they were women... [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 14, now 27]

It was very violent. I didn't want to fight. Whether you're right or wrong, but villagers were always the victims. They would get beaten, tortured, their rice fields were burned down. The soldiers always did the looting. Sometimes I would get beaten for not doing these things. [Myanmar – joined when he was 13, now 18]

We were told how to treat villagers, how to treat someone younger than you. The soldiers never practiced what they taught. They forced villagers to be porters and looted their property. I witnessed this many times. I witnessed many rapes. If you were caught [raping someone] the punishment would be prison. [Myanmar – joined when he was 12, now 17]

Everyday we were taken with them by car to burn houses, kill animals and harass people. Sometimes we were happy to burn the houses because we were enjoying ourselves. But other times I felt that it was not good to burn the houses and to hurt these people, but we had to do this because we were afraid. If we didn't do this we would die. Everyday they came to get us and if we didn't want to go they would threaten us with machetes. [East Timor – joined when he was 14, now 16]

Many times I had to do something I didn't like. Villagers usually would bring us food. But when we ran out [of food], we had to go to old people and threaten them. I stepped back to think about what we were doing and I see they are like our parents. I only did it a few times... [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was about 15, now 23]

" DON'T STEAL, DON'T TALK TO GIRLS OR HAVE SEX... "

Don't steal, don't talk with girls or have sex and no fighting or we would be shot. The BRA was very strict, trying to show people we don't have to do these activities – have to look at what we are fighting for – freedom. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 11, now 23]

If somebody committed a violation of the rules of the MILF, especially those who get ammunition without permission, they were put into the detention cell. [Philippines – joined when he was 16, now 19]

They kicked and beat us with a wooden stick and said we had not obeyed their orders. One night when we all were afraid to go to work and were supposed to guard a security post, they searched and found us at our homes and kicked and beat the whole group. I was wounded from this on my leg. I saw a refugee shot with a pistol at his head. The militia killed him when they caught him. I was just involved with the militia for a short time and in the night I kept guard at a security post. [East Timor – joined when he was 17, now 18]

Most of the time the commanders were very good, very concerned about the young boys. They advised about not fighting with others because it would cause disharmony among them. [Their support] helped me to stay in the camp. They usually gave advice to young persons and openly discussed ideas about reinforcing camp and soldier rules. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 8, now 20]

The commanders treated us very well. They helped us when we had to fight and they treated us better than our parents did. [East Timor – joined when he was 12, now 28]

We were told to respect each other's rights – the right to say what you think and feel. You could express your opinions to anybody in the movement – even to ranking officers. You also have the right to keep silent. It applies to all – young and old people, men and women. A woman can do what a man can. We were all equal. ...The officers were treated with respect and they would treat us respectfully in return. His or her orders were not to be automatically followed. We were told to review our orders if they were right or not.

Most of the armed forces and groups had strict internal rules. Generally, they forced the children to always follow orders. The punishments for disobeying orders were less uniform and ranged from constructive duties, such as fetching water, to outright physical abuse.

The treatment of child soldiers by older soldiers varied. In some armed groups and forces, older soldiers were very aggressive and ordered young fighters around.

Some children talked about seeing other young boys cry and about trainers who would either talk with them and try to console them or, more commonly, beat them for crying.

In armed groups bound by a cause or an ideology, there appeared to be more of a sense of belonging, and older soldiers were more likely to look out for the younger ones.

While alcohol and drugs in general were prohibited by most armed groups and armies, there were many references to the use of such substances.

Interviewees in East Timor recalled drug-induced craziness among militia members that led to abusive behaviour, especially against civilians.

Children also reported disciplinary measures if someone was caught drinking or using drugs.

Were they justified? Were they sensible and practical? If you felt that the order given was wrong, you had the option not to follow it. [Philippines – joined when she was 13, now 16]

Some soldiers used marijuana. They hid it in their boots. Some soldiers use opium. Sometimes they smoked at night. Some drank. Yes, I used [drugs]. [Myanmar – joined when he was 16, now 17]

I was in my house and [the militia] came to get me when they needed me – everyday – and they were drunk. I had to drink Tuak [palm wine]. They also drank blood. The older ones took capsules [angin gila, or "crazy dog" pills, which are amphetamines]. After they took the pills they didn't remember anything they did and they went crazy. [East Timor – joined when he was 16, now 17]

They screamed and shouted when they had killed people and showed off their machetes covered with blood and said, "Eat the people." There was so much blood. They drank alcohol made from palm like tuak and tuasabo and they ate angin gila tablets [amphetamines]. I did not drink or take any tablets. [East Timor – joined when he was 14, now 16]

I was beaten only once. They told us not to go home and drink alcohol. I went home and got drunk and fired my gun. We were told not to use our weapons in the villages. Some BRAs heard it and reported me. I was drunk with my friends. [He thinks he was 16 years old then] The commander, in his 30s, threatened to kill me if I ever did it again. The whole section beat me up. I broke a rib. I accept it. I know it was my own mistake. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was about 15, now 23]

We arrested drug pushers. There was someone who planted marijuana. We issued him a warning and then we arrested him. [Philippines – joined when he was 14, now 16]

" T H E Y O R D E R E D U S T O R A P E . . . "

The first time they took me from my house we had to rape a woman and then kill anything we could find, like animals and people. They ordered us to rape. We did this together. [East Timor – joined when he was 14, now 16]

In our group there were more than 10 young boys. They were around 10 years old. Sometimes they also went on the operations to destroy houses. They also were on guard duty. We learned only bad things while we were in the militia. We didn't learn anything useful. We learned bad things because we were taught how to destroy houses, rape girls, beat people and kill people. They raped girls in their own houses. I didn't see the militiamen rape the girls but they told me they had done this. [East Timor – joined when he was 14, now 18]

In the care centre, the PNG treat people very bad. They raped girls 15 to 20 years old. I know about 10 girls who were raped who were 15 or 16 years old. They would shoot people they suspected of helping the BRA. They burned homes. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 11, now 23]

I felt terrified when I was hiding in the graveyard. I was afraid the soldiers would capture and rape me. I knew a 16-year-old girl who was caught by the soldiers. The next day, we found her with her clothes torn off and her body was riddled with bullets. One of us turned her over and it seemed to me that the bullets drew a picture on the earth. [Philippines – joined when she was 13, now 16]

I witnessed some rapes. If you were caught, punishment would be prison. [Myanmar – joined when he 12, now 17]

[If civilians were suspected of helping the PNG forces] they were given a warning. If it continued, they would be taken to the commander and thoroughly interrogated: they'd be beaten with guns. Women were also beaten. Not in our area, but I heard that in other areas some women were raped. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 10, now 19]

They took the women into the camp for a month. These women were not released until they were raped many times by the officers, then other ranks and all platoons and all sections. In the front line area when they take the women from the village, they gave to the captains. The officer raped first. When these women were returned to [the soldiers] they raped them. Even till now, they keep doing that way. [These women] will be raped one by one by all the soldiers until she loses consciousness. [Myanmar – joined when he was 16, now 17]

Many interviewed referred to internal rules on sexual conduct relating to having girl/boyfriends and acts of sexual violence in most armed groups. There were many reports of sexual violence, mainly against civilian girls and women. Sometimes the statements referred to rapes committed by enemy forces.

Several boys talked of being told to rape girls and women or of hearing reports from other soldiers about rapes.

The two girls interviewed spoke about their fears of being raped if caught by the enemy.

One young child soldier gave a disturbing account of what appears to be the forced sexual servitude of girls and women from villages. He estimated the women to be 17 years and older. However, based on the details given in the interview, it appears that some of these victims were in fact much younger than 17.

" MY JOBS WERE TO TAKE CARE OF SECURITY, COOKING AND CARRYING ORDERS"

The children interviewed described the various roles and functions they had as child soldiers. All involvement of children in armed conflict is harmful to children, which is why the definition of a child soldier has to be inclusive rather than exclusive of noncombat duties. It is not necessarily the role itself that is harmful, but the environment and the proximity to violence.

Most children were used in combat, but some also spent time guarding checkpoints or acting as messengers or spies. Only 9 per cent reported that they did not fight at all but rather served as porters, cooks or sentries.

While these children were not directly involved in fighting, it is clear from the interviews that child porters in particular had very tough jobs. Less information seems to be available on the use and plight of children solely as spies or messengers.

My jobs were to take care of security, cooking and carrying orders from one commander to other commanders. [East Timor – joined when he was 15, now 19]

[My jobs were] cooking, staying in the camp to guard, patrolling for three to four hours in the morning. Sometimes they sent me to go checking tracks, impressions in dust or look for food. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was about 9, now 19]

The next time they started to burn houses I went with them and indicated houses of pro-independence supporters to be burned and their owners ran away. [East Timor – joined when he was 17, now 18]

My job is to make and prepare bows and arrows that would be taken by fighters to make war against the rebels. [Indonesia – joined when he was 16, now 17]

I was the radio operator. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 17, now 26]

Our unit was a special support unit to reinforce other companies. Usually we wouldn't go on patrol. For days we'd hang around the camp, work in the garden. Every two months we do a patrol for two weeks, patrolling and fighting. Walking all day all night, more than 100 kilometres, carrying bags with our equipment, webbing, clothes, blanket. In the patrol camp, you would sleep only two hours then wake up so someone else could sleep. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 11, now 23]

[I was best at] close range firing. [But the most difficult job] was when I was assigned to assassinate somebody at Isabela, which is surrounded by the army and the police. [Philippines – joined when he was 17, now 26]

To recruit the children. [Indonesia – joined when he was 16, now 17]

I had to find information for Falintil. I had to listen to other people talking and report on this to my brother Fabio. When I did this I was afraid. I watched the houses of certain people. My brother asked me to go and do this and I told him what they said and did. There were no other youth who had this job in the village. [East Timor – joined when he was 10, now 12]

I worked at the checkpoint from April to September 1999. I felt sick when I worked at the checkpoint because I didn't sleep enough. I became thin. We want to continue our studies but sometimes it is difficult – sometimes there are people who don't like us. [East Timor – joined when he was 16, now 17]

For girls, they are well treated, and their duty is only to help provide food for the group. [Indonesia – joined when he was 16, now 17]

There were girls helping, but they made the gardens. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 17, now 25]

We sometimes used [girls] as spies. They'd be sent to the PNG care centres to see how the PNG were treating people. But they'd be 20 and older. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 11, now 23]

There were girls [in the MILF]. Girls were not allowed to fight. They were limited to cooking, cleaning and helping in the clinic. There were orphans also. [Philippines – joined when he was 12, now 16]

Girls were also ordered to wash and iron clothes for the officers in the base camp. Some were forced to travel with an officer to the frontline. I ran away because I didn't want to see these abuses. Two times I was asked to sleep with girls and I refused. They said I betrayed them and I was beaten. [Myanmar – joined when he was 16, now 17]

The child soldiers generally took turns with the adults in cooking meals and gathering firewood and water. Based on the interviews, it seems that armed groups have not taken advantage of child soldiers to recruit other children. In fact, only one boy mentioned that his job was to recruit other children.

A couple boys talked of being trained to assassinate. One said he was trained for urban demolition and carried out one assassination, while another said he had been trained as a sniper.

There were many references to the roles of girls in the interviews. Girls were used as spies, cooks or medics and some also for sexual purposes. Girls who served as medics seem to have been a bit older and were expected to have at least a high school education.

There were also reports of girls who were first and foremost fighters. All-girl military units documented in some other studies do not come up in any of the interviews conducted for this report.

Some children were expected to maintain the same pace as adults, even during exhausting, day-long patrols. Many children reported being beaten if they failed to keep up.

Handling a gun appears to have been difficult for the young fighters, many of whom admitted that even on the frontlines they would either stay in the back of their unit or were told by their commanders to remain there. Clearly, different children coped differently with the hardships.

...they made me "team leader" for a short time because they thought I was alert and smart. Then I was trained to become a medic. They taught me the traditional ways of healing. [Philippines – joined when she was 13, now 16]

The girls' job was to cook when the leaders came. ... We went with them when they went to burn the houses because the militiamen always said to us, "if you don't come with us to burn the houses, we will kill you." Before making operations, we were given orders by both the TNI troops and the Halilintar militiamen. [East Timor – joined when he was 17, now 18]

For girls, they were well treated and their duty was only to help provide food for the group. [Indonesia – joined when he was 16, now 17]

During the first few days with the NPA, I cried because I found the Garand and my pack too heavy. I had to carry a few kilos of rice, sardines, noodles and a pot. I also didn't have any spare clothes. The others encouraged me by telling me that what I was feeling was normal. To tell you the truth, I was crying because I was thinking that my life would not be this hard if Mama had been more caring. [Philippines – joined when she was 13, now 16]

All the things we had to carry were very heavy. If you can't carry them, they come and kick you, beat you. [Myanmar – joined when he was 12, now 17]

I had to carry shells up and down the mountains and through the thick forests. It was exhausting work and sometimes I was forced to undertake a second sortie, even though I was nearly on my knees. [Cambodia – joined when he was 13, now 15]

" N o , I ' M N O T B E I N G P A I D ... "

We were given one uniform. I brought my own shoes. No, I'm not being paid. [Philippines – joined when he was 17, now 26]

I wore shorts and shirts and no shoes. I wanted them for protection when on patrols in the bush. You can easily be injured by the rocks, stones, vines with thorns. Our food came from the bush, or we'd find it in gardens left behind. Sometimes we had no food for one or two days. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 8, now 20]

They distributed only one piece of soap per person and put one piece in their pocket. [Myanmar – joined when he was 16, now 17]

I had long hair. There was no comb. We washed with coconut juice when there was no soap. We cleaned our teeth with betel nut skin. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 8, now 20]

We worked together; we would get food and cook together. We slept in huts. There was never a doctor. We patrolled every day, usually five-hour walks. Even in the rainy time we had to patrol. But it wasn't difficult. I had no shoes; wore shorts and t-shirts. I had few clothes. We washed with coconut milk. I couldn't brush my teeth. The other soldiers, all of them, were very nice. Another boy told me when on patrol that my eyes must be in front always and to listen carefully to every sound. If someone gets hit, we have to help him. Afterward, we would talk about the attacks. We attacked in the daytime. I hope I've killed some. I never saw [if I did]. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was about 15, now 23]

The type and size of compensation paid to soldiers, including children, varied among the different armed groups and armies. Provisions of clothing, food, hygiene products, etc. also varied widely.

Regular national armed forces typically supplied uniforms, rations, meals, medical and other provisions.

Other armed groups were less structured in terms of pay and provisions for individual soldiers. Many armed groups seemed to have had little or nothing for any of their soldiers, with no special treatment extended to the child soldiers.

Rebel groups, especially in more isolated areas, did not provide even basic hygiene items, such as soap, shampoo and tooth brushes. In Bougainville, for example, which had been cut off entirely from the outside world, soldiers used coconut water to wash.

Conditions varied between different armed groups, sometimes even within one ethnic group. While some fighters in one army spoke of having enough to eat, others admitted there was not enough food available. And even when food was available there was little variation. One boy talked of having to steal from villagers when the food ran out. Some platoons and military units also grew their own vegetables; gardening was often a form of internal punishment.

How compensation and other provisions were distributed among the soldiers also varied. Some groups had a policy of differential treatment for children, and discriminatory practices were common. One child reported that he received smaller food rations because he was smaller. The quality of provisions, such as uniforms and arms, could also be of lower quality for some children.

I had no comb in the bush so I shaved the sides of my head. We washed with coconut juice. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 17, now 26]

They gave us enough food. It was mostly fish, no meat. They gave us "tropical" clothing in seven colours. No civilian clothes were allowed. We wore combat shoes. Somebody gets our shoe size and buys the shoes for us. They gave us a complete supply of toothbrush, toothpaste, soap and shampoo. [Philippines – joined when he was 14, now 16]

I brushed my teeth with coconut shell. We didn't wash very regularly. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 14, now 27]

My comrades went down the mountain to get our food supplies. If we ran out of supplies, we ate sweet potatoes and bananas. Sometimes we had meat. But not the meat sold in the markets. We got to eat meat when we were able to kill a wild boar or snakes. We saw to it that we ate three times a day. Even if we spent days walking, we stopped to have our meal. But we never had a proper meal. It was more for our sustenance, enough for us to live. [Philippines – joined when he was 14, now 16]

The first time the militia caught me in January, they said, "now you are a militia!" They promised to give me money and rice and they gave it to me. Sometimes they gave me 250 rupiahs [about two US cents] and 10 kilograms of rice. [East Timor – joined when he was 14, now 16]

I was paid once, when I first joined the militia I got 25,000 rupiah [about \$3-\$4]. After that I was never paid again. [East Timor – joined when he was 17, now 18]

We didn't receive an allowance. You already knew from the start that there was no pay. You joined because you wanted to help and serve the poor, the suffering. You joined because you really wanted to. If you didn't want to, they wouldn't force you to join. [Philippines – joined when he was 14, now 16]

If both parents were with the NPA, their children would receive 3,000 pesos a month. Single persons get 50 pesos a day. We all get paid if there were funds available. A man who looked like he's from the city often brought the money. [Philippines – joined when she was 13, now 16]

We were paid 5 kyats per day. They started issuing the salary seven weeks after [the beginning of training]. We had to save 3,000 in the bank. They didn't give us the 500 kyats directly; the trainers kept the money and if we wanted to have some snack or cheroot we had to ask them. [Myanmar – joined when he was 16, now 17]

My family did not receive any compensation. I joined the MILF not for pay but for Allah. It is the command of Allah. Whoever doesn't join the jihad will be committing a sin. [Philippines – joined when he was 16, now 19]

Sometimes kinder, older soldiers or village civilians would provide food for the young soldiers.

Most child soldiers did not receive any salary or only a very small salary. It is clear that some children were lured to join an armed group because of the promise of money, but salaries were rarely or only partially paid. Even so, significantly few complained of the low or non-existent salary.

It is not certain that if the economic opportunities were better in areas where most young fighters originated if they would still choose to fight. Economic inequalities, however, obviously did result in many children becoming fighters.

"YES, WE HAVE DOCTORS..."

Seven injuries due to gunshot or other combat injuries were reported in the interviews.

Several interviewees claimed that constant bouts of malaria were the hardest part of being a soldier. Malaria and other sicknesses were treated with bush medicine in cases where there were insufficient anti-malarial medicines.

One child soldier, now 18, poked his eye with a bamboo stick while making his bed and lost sight in that eye. He did not receive proper medical attention for his injury because, as a child soldier, he did not believe anyone in the nearby refugee camp would treat him. Because he has been fighting with an ethnic army, he receives no disability payments and will be forced out of the army soon.

If you ask me about a doctor, yes we have doctors. There are many members of this organization who went to medical school. We have enough medicine for the injured or sick soldiers. If there were no doctors or medicine, our commander would go to the urban centres and buy medicine. Yes, we have rules about the release of medicines because we cannot be sure that all soldiers are honest. Sometimes a soldier will sell our medicine supplies. [Philippines – joined when he was 16, now 19]

We had to find medicines or traditional drugs ourselves to cure our diseases or wounds. If we were sick, they didn't give us medicines. [East Timor – joined when he was 17, now 18]

If you got sick and you needed medicine, they gave you what you needed if it was available and they would care for you. ... It felt good to have people who understood me and cared for me. [Philippines – joined when she was 13, now 16]

I had malaria one time and had a lot of pain in my head. I was never injured [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was about 9, now 19]

Soldiers [such as official TNI soldiers] who are shot are taken to the Military Hospital and [grassroots] fighters are taken to the Al-Fatah Hospital. [Indonesia – joined when he was 16, now 17]

[Once] I went to a village with some friends to look for fruit. I had my gun. We were ambushed by the BRA and I was shot in the neck, on the right side, with a shotgun. If it had been a M16, I'd be dead already. Sometimes I feel sick [because of the injury]. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 14, now 18]

In 1996 I was shot in the shoulder. The wound was treated with bush medicine – plants and extracts. For several weeks afterward, I had headaches. Another time, PNG soldiers were attacking the camp and I fell down and hit my mouth against a rock and lost a front tooth and cut my forehead where I now have a scar. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 14, now 27]

I realized that travelling around in the nights I spoiled my growth. I didn't rest my body. I had malaria three times. For treatment, I drank bush medicine. When we were sick, they let us rest. During times of being sick it was very hard. I was shot in the right knee in mid-96. It hurt a lot. That time I was thinking of giving up. It was a small injury but I was in a lot of pain. I thought of what the other soldiers would say about me, put me down – I had to go on. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 11, now 23]

I was in the middle of the rice field at 6 a.m. when the planes and helicopters carrying bombs arrived. ... I was so confused and scared that in my thoughts I surrendered myself to God because I was not sure if I would survive it. I saw that blood was all over me and I was wounded after the explosions. I was hit on my left leg and back. My grandfather died in that raid. I was told later that I had been walking aimlessly for two days without a thought to where I was going before I was found. [Philippines – joined when he was 7, now 15]

I was hit on my upper right arm. ... I lingered in the mountains for six days. I was alone. I felt like fainting but I fought it. What sustained me were bananas and water from coconuts. Then the common folks found me. I was ready to die. For me it would have been a worthwhile death because I died helping those in need. But God did not want me to die yet. For that I am grateful. [Philippines – joined when he was 14, now 16]

I was shot in the leg in June 2001. It's a little painful but doesn't bother me walking. This wound encourages me to keep fighting for my cause – my people, my country. [Myanmar – joined when he was 15, now 17]

I know lots of children who have been injured by mines. Most lost limbs, some were blinded. What I remember most from those days is seeing someone shot through the chest and head. I felt so frightened that I could not move. I sometimes have vivid dreams about that day. [Cambodia – age when joined unknown, now 16]

Young boys in Cambodia, considered one of the most landmine-contaminated countries in the world, frequently mentioned their fear of landmines. Children in Myanmar never spoke about landmines except to say they had not been taught how to plant them. This is surprising considering the high level of contamination of landmines in areas where those children have been involved as child soldiers.

Based on the interviews, it appears that the planting of landmines was not entrusted to children.

" K I L L O R B E K I L L E D ... "

Killing is part of warfare. But perhaps because of their youth or innocence, several of those interviewed talked of being surprised when confronted with the reality of killing.

A number of children felt remorse for what they had seen or done. Some spoke of compassion toward the "enemy". Several, however, said they felt satisfied or somehow triumphant when they killed an enemy soldier. Most talked about the dilemma of "kill or be killed".

From the interviews, it is impossible to draw any conclusions on the impact the taking of another person's life has had on the young people. While this was discussed during the interviews, the responses of the young people was not sufficient to shed light on all the underlying psychological processes and dynamics.

Despite their young age, many of the children had been taught to rationalize killing. Some spoke of their religion or their group's policy to kill only "the enemy". Other children explained that if they had not killed a certain person, that person would have killed them.

The first time I fought, I made the sign of the cross because I was afraid. I said to myself, "Why did I end up here anyway." Somebody asked me, "Why are you shaking?" I'm scared.

"Now that you're here, it's kill or be killed."

I have to kill someone?

"What did you think?"

[Philippines - joined when she was 13, now 16]

I shot one man in the chest and he fell on the ground. I didn't feel anything that first time. I had a bad feeling after that, my feelings changed. After two weeks, I went back to my village. I talked with my parents. They said, "Come home, you are not fit to join the BRA. You are too small." I can take care of myself, I said. After the shooting, I felt I am a soldier. Since then, I feel satisfied. I am a brave soldier."

[Papua New Guinea - joined when he was 17, now 26]

It feels great to kill your enemy. The MILF does not initiate attacks. If the military didn't attack us, there will be no trouble. They are the ones who are really at fault. They deserve to be killed. The other children, they are happy too. They are not sad. I really do not regret killing. If they are your enemies, you can kill them. But if they are not your enemies, you shouldn't kill them. [Philippines - joined when he was 13, current age unknown]

I fought from 1992 until 1997. I can recall killing about five people. I saw five, at least. In my first experience I felt my body very relaxed, really satisfied. We always ambushed. After seven months with the BRA, I had some instruction in ambush attacks, how to take cover. ... Before going on an operation, we said prayers. There were traditional rituals of cleansing with water and bush leaves by special men from a village. We would split banana trees and walk through them to give us protection. [Papua New Guinea - joined when he was 12, now 21]

[When I saw other young friends were killed] I felt that human life has no value any more. I have killed [but I don't want to talk about it]. [Indonesia – joined when he was 15, now 16]

I never knew for sure if I shot anybody. We were usually ambushed at night and I couldn't see if I hit somebody. Did you know that in the dark, bullets flash like fire? There were some who pretended to be tough after they learned that they killed someone. Their eyes would flash and they seemed to be very alert. But then I noticed that they did not seem to be aware of what was happening around them. I think they were in shock. I saw a 17-year-old girl cry and pray to God to forgive her for what she did. There were those who found it easier to kill after the first one. They got used to it. It's kill or be killed. [Philippines – joined when she was 13, now 16]

I once killed someone because I was almost killed from behind. So I immediately turned around and stabbed him in the neck. [More children died than adult soldiers] because most of the fighters of my age want to sacrifice themselves for country and nation and because they are still young, they always want to be placed on the frontline during times of fighting. [Indonesia 20 – joined when he was 16, now 17]

I had a lot of fear. I would be thinking, "If I'm unlucky, I'll be dead today." When I was able to escape [from an attack] and find a safe place, I would realize I'm safe. The [first time I killed someone] it was a surprise attack on the PNG camp at 3 a.m. It lasted about 30 minutes. Most of the PNG soldiers were wounded. I shot my gun many times. I'm confident I hit some. I saw two at close range. I was very nervous. Then I saw the blood pouring out of [one soldier's] chest. Back at the camp they asked how did I take cover, how did I come out. I felt successful, I felt relaxed. All together, I was in five or six fights. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was about 9, now 19]

Only 12 children said they knew for certain that they had killed someone. Nearly every child spoke of their fear during the first experience of hostilities. But once they had fired their gun and survived the encounter, they gained considerable confidence.

A few never overcame that initial terror of an armed exchange, but most realized they had no choice. Some reported suddenly feeling like a "soldier" and being emboldened by a sense of duty and a new-found bravery.

The killing became "tolerable" for some of the children because they went to the front filled with anger or a deep sense of righteousness about their group's cause.

Combat experiences varied considerably. A few children were deployed to security posts and never had to endure a frontline situation, though most people interviewed had been part of an attack or had been ambushed at least once.

Among the 30 children who went into some detail in considering the type of fighting they had been involved in, 14 said they had fought in so many battles they could not remember the number. Eleven of them said they never experienced an armed encounter. One boy estimated he had been involved in 60 large and smaller scale armed incidents.

Those who were forced to fight had brutal or terrifying experiences of being cut off from families, beaten, underfed, lied to and made to commit or witness abuses. Among those who had been forced to become child soldiers, in state and non-state armed groups, beatings and intimidation were used to keep them in submission.

Many of the interviewees thought they would not be in the fighting ranks for long, that they were only joining for a short period of time and that they could endure it. As the children became more used to life as a soldier, they developed coping mechanisms for surviving.

I saw one of my buddies hit by a V-90, a powerful weapon of the enemy that almost cut his body into pieces. [I was not scared] because I put it in my mind that only Allah can kill us. [Philippines – joined when he was 16, now 19]

I shot one man in the chest and he fell on the ground. I didn't feel anything that first time. I had a bad feeling after that, my feelings changed. After two weeks, I went back to my village. I talked with my parents. They said, "Come home, you are not fit to join the BRA. You are too small." I can take care of myself, I said. After the shooting, I felt I am a soldier. Since then, I feel satisfied. I am a brave soldier." [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 17, now 26]

The first time I was also scared and thought that it was inhumane. But I wanted to be able to continue. Better that way than to be killed. ...When I face an enemy and have to kill him, because I know that he is human just like me. But if I don't kill, I'll be killed. ... I faced the enemy only four times. At that time, I shot immediately arrows or stabbed, according to my principle: I have to kill first rather than be killed. [Indonesia – joined when he was 16, now 17]

I fought from 1992 until 1997. I can recall killing about five people. I saw five, at least. In my first experience I felt my body very relaxed, really satisfied. We always ambushed. After seven months with the BRA, I had some instruction in ambush attacks, how to take cover. ...The church elders came to our section and conducted prayers. Before going on an operation, we said prayers. There were traditional rituals of cleansing with water and bush leaves by special men from a village. We would split banana trees and walk through them to give us protection. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 12, now 21]

After seeing many people shot, it doesn't affect me. It's part of the duty. It's a very strange feeling, a kind of fear, but then it's over. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 14, now 27]

I felt that human life has no value any more [when I see my friends kill someone or someone being killed].
[Indonesia – joined when he was 14, now 16]

I have seen others die. For me, it's hard to describe it. When I see somebody is dying, I feel bad.
[Philippines – joined when he was 16, now 19]

I felt sorry for them when I saw them dying. They too have sons and only war makes us enemies. It was very difficult to accept but if I don't kill them, they will kill me. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 13, now 22]

We put four hand grenades into a bunker. It made a big destruction. Four soldiers and three resistance forces were killed. My cousin, myself and three others did it. ... That was the first time I saw somebody I had killed. I didn't talk about. I wanted to keep it to myself. What I saw in reality, how people were dead in those wars, haunts me. If we die from sickness it is good. If we die in wars, in fight, it's not good, it's not right. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 11, now 23]

When I was 13 years old, I had my first encounter. I was able to kill some enemies. The second encounter was just recently, May of this year, when Camp Abubakar was attacked. I was scared of what will happen to us because we did not heed the call of Allah, we did not follow his command/teachings. I am happy when I kill the enemies. It is all right to kill for jihad. It is bad to kill innocent people. For people who have harmed us, it is okay to kill. When Camp Abubakar was attacked, it was okay to fight, to kill because we were just defending the camp. [Philippines – joined when he was 12, now 16]

One of our friends was killed – it was 1987. I didn't feel anything when I saw my friend killed because as a guerrilla the only thing that we could focus on was saving our lives. We didn't care if one of us were killed – we didn't even bury the body. We only thought about when we ourselves would be killed. That became normal for me. My mother and my brother-in-law were killed but you could only say, "This is war." [East Timor – joined when he was 14, now 31]

Those who witnessed killings described feelings of pity, outrage, vulnerability and aloofness. A couple of young soldiers talked of how they thought it was wrong to kill countrymen. It seems that fighting and killing provoked fear and/or elation, depending on the person's reasons for participating in the armed group.

Finally, when asked if they have nightmares, rarely did anyone speak of being haunted by the deaths of others. Many talked of fearing their own death.

"IT WAS A GOOD EXPERIENCE FOR ME..."

There were several voices of affirmation and gratitude for what seemed to them positive military experiences. These young fighters, both former and current, talked of learning discipline, feeling cared for, being respected or treated better than at home and having developed greater respect and love for their country or homeland. Some were simply stoic – they did not feel positive about their time in an armed group, but they spoke about moving on and trying to live a better life.

Many children expressed anger over the circumstances surrounding their recruitment, especially if they were forced to join. Others, who were forced into armed forces or groups by poverty or family circumstances also expressed regret and sadness about having to leave their home and family.

Thinking back, it was a good experience for me. If I had stayed in the town, without enough food I might have had to do something bad, such as stealing or something like that. Now I think more about studying, continuing my education. Now my aim is not to be a soldier but to do other things. I would like to go to Bible school. [Myanmar – joined when he was 12, now 24]

[When she lived with Falintil, they provided her with an almost spiritual belief in the liberation of her country. She described that time as one of] peace, solidarity, discipline and moral courage. [East Timor – joined when she was 15, now 19]

If I did not join the MILF, I might now be a gangster. I am lucky. I discovered what is right and wrong under the MILF. [Philippines – joined when he was 16, now 19]

After one year with the Abu Sayyaf group, I was sent on scholarship. I studied computer engineering. [Philippines – joined when he was 17, now 26]

People were trying to destroy the goodness...we came to value the place [because of being involved in the fighting]. We were sacrificing our lives and that increased the position, the value we had for the island and our families. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 17, now 25]

I don't regret being a combatant. I was able to serve the people, to help the needy. And that's one thing I can be proud of. [Philippines – joined when he was 14, now 16]

When I was a child I didn't enjoy my childhood because of the war – we all knew that once we participated in this struggle we could forget about our childhoods. [East Timor – joined when he was 10, now 12]

I'm happy about what I learned, like different leadership styles. Now that I'm back in school I am seen as the class captain. I can apply skills [I learned] to manage. I think that if a similar war breaks out I would fight again. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 17, now 26]

Sometimes they teach us how to plant rice, fruit trees and other crops. [Philippines – joined when he was 16, now 19]

The skills I learned for self-defence I can use when I go back to civilian life. [Philippines – joined when he was 12, now 16]

Soldiers don't cry. And even when I saw someone killed, I never felt frightened or cried. I just felt it was normal. [Cambodia – joined when he was 13, now 17 and still in uniform]

I think if a similar war breaks out I [would fight again]. It's good there's a certain age before joining to fight. It has to be an age, probably 20 or older, when you can reason out what's taking place, reason out directions of bullets. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 17, now 26]

[If I hadn't gone into the army] I feel I would be a very different person now. I feel I was coerced. I knew nothing. I regret it now. I'm not satisfied with my situation. I want some revenge. I feel I was unfairly treated. I must take some revenge against the army. [Myanmar – joined when he was 13, now 18]

I still want to take revenge because I am separated from my family. I want to give them [the government soldiers] the same suffering I have had. One day...if I get the chance.. [I will do something] for all the people sharing the same suffering. If I hadn't been taken by the soldiers, I'd be living with my parents happily, warmly. I'd be educated. It's what I want. [Myanmar – joined when he was 12, now 17]

I was 12 when I discovered ...that the real killers of my father were [not the military but] his own companions in the movement because the NPAs suspected that he was spying for the military. I felt anger when I learned of the truth because I realized that my life was wasted. [Philippines – joined when he was 7, now 15]

Boys who had been forcibly recruited or who otherwise felt betrayed said their anger made it possible for them to continue fighting. They sought revenge for what they had lost – their childhood and their family.

Some children expressed regret that they were unable to go to school. They were discouraged by the difficulties they faced should they attempt to return to school, in their late teens and early twenties. And some of them realize that the options available – besides continuing in the ranks – are very limited.

" A GOOD AGE FOR YOUTH TO JOIN THE ARMY IS 18 . . . "

When asked what they thought was a suitable age for recruitment, many indicated a minimum age of 18. Others suggested ages ranging between 20 and 25 as the minimum age for recruitment.

Nearly all the children recommended a minimum age that was considerably higher than the age at which they had been recruited or forced to join. One boy, recruited at age 11, suggested 23 as the minimum age, while another boy forced to join at the age of 9, suggested 20 to 21 as the appropriate age.

A good age for youth to join the army is 18 years old because new under-18 recruits are still just kids and they can't make their own decisions properly. [East Timor – joined when he was 14, now 31]

Young ones should not be allowed to fight. Twenty, twenty-one would be an appropriate age. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 12, now 21]

When you have knowledge, maybe around age 18. [Myanmar – joined when he was 10, now 14]

I wish I had waited till I was around 20 to become a fighter. If you are younger than 20 your mind is full of thoughts and you won't be concentrating for what you are fighting for. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 11, now 23]

For fighting, I think 14 is too young. Eighteen is a proper age. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 14, now 18]

I think the strength of young people is really needed. Someone joining an army should be 15 years old or older. [Indonesia – joined when he was 16, now 17]

From the age of 12 upward, and it shouldn't be forced. [Indonesia – joined when he was 16, now 17]

Based on my own experience and the experience of my friends, I think it is better to start as soldiers at 20 to 25 years old. This is the right time for teaching people and they are mature enough to use their experience to share with the other people who want to join. It is the right time for people to be receptive to the ideas and the work. [East Timor – joined when she was 15, now 19]

I don't think there should be rules on an age for fighting. I think it is acceptable for 13- or 14-year-olds to fight. If they stay in the village, they will be killed. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 13, now 22]

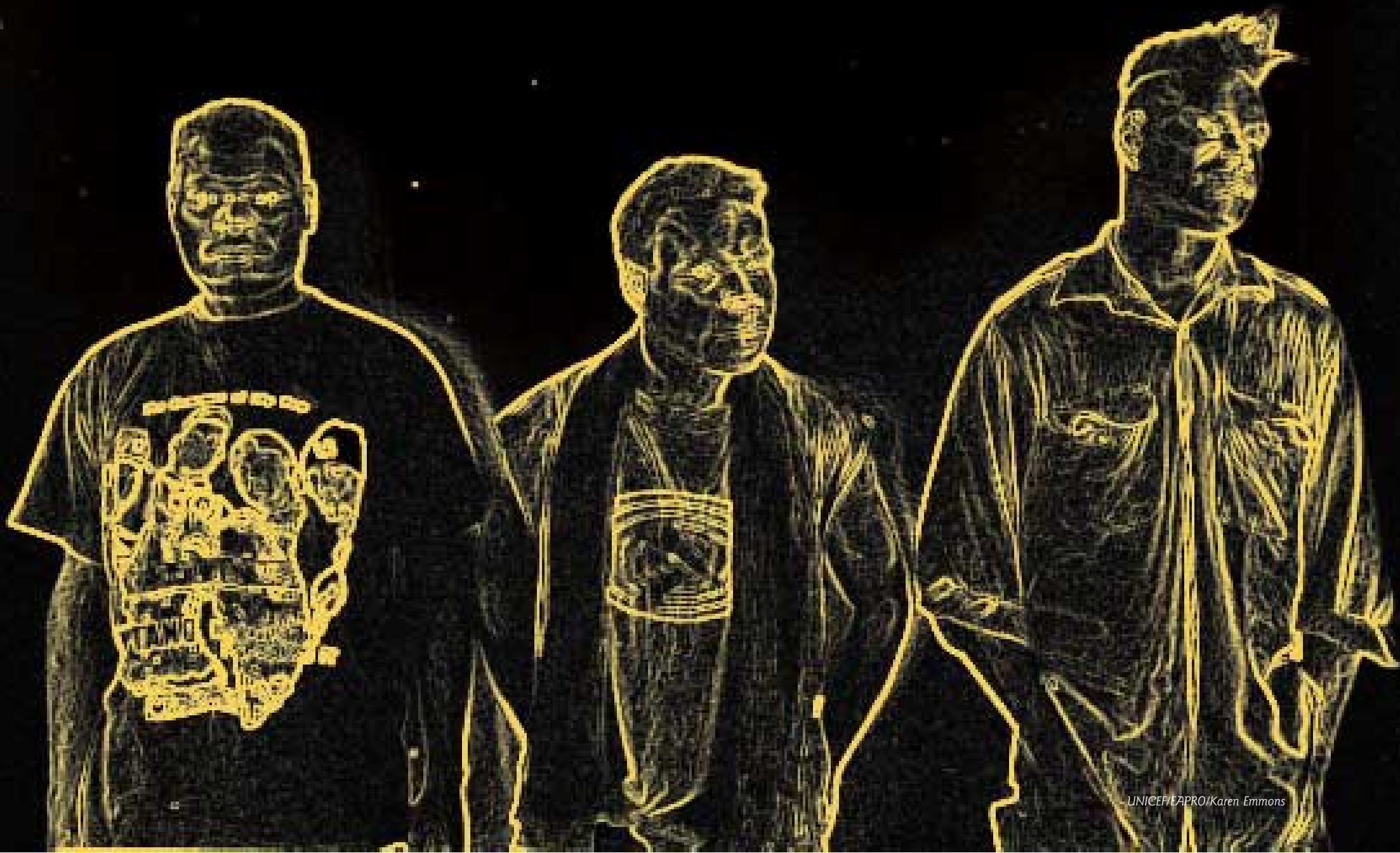
It is advantageous if someone joins while still young because he will learn more, especially about self-discipline. [Philippines – joined when he was 16, now 19]

If possible, at the early years of 9 to 12 years old, if they are already conscious of what they are doing. [Philippines – joined when he was 17, now 26]

As for young people being soldiers, It's up to them. We can't say do this or do that. But I agree young ones should get an education first. It's a good idea. [Myanmar – joined when he was 14, now 18]

A few respondents were of the view that there should be no minimum age: that if someone is willing and capable of using a gun, then he or she should have "the right" to be a soldier, or to at least make their own decision. Some children suggested that whether or not a child is mature enough to be recruited depends on the maturity of the child.

Some children also commented on the different roles that children should be assigned, such as easier tasks or non-combat duties for the younger children.



Jonah joined the Bougainville Revolutionary (BRA) at the beginning of violence, when he was 14. He was 27 when interviewed. Jonah is one of four children in his family. He quit school in the third grade but, when the fighting ended, he returned to finish his education.

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I wanted to be a soldier in the BRA and own a gun so that I could protect Bougainville from outsiders and kill PNGCDF security. When the soldiers came and occupied Bougainville, they killed many people. The riot squad destroyed and burned villages. We wanted to retaliate. I didn't think it would last long. I was thinking when we wipe out the enemy, the fighting would be over. Those who joined did on their own decision. The BRA was very popular.

I was the first of my family to join. My father gave me a gun, a rifle. Two of my brothers joined later. The first one joined two years after me and the second one came three years later. They were in school. I had dropped out of Grade 3 and was just in the village. ... There was no television, no movies around... My parents advised me to take care of myself, not to do anything like steal or destroy other people's property, to have good behaviour and discipline because, if I misbehaved or had no discipline...I would get caught in crossfire. I would think of my island, my people. Once a month I would go home.

It was on-the-job training. Some retired soldiers in the village gave me a crash course. They told me how to take cover. The first time I was very frightened. Three months after joining, I was in my first ambush. ...The BRA used ambush strategies for getting guns.

There were very strict rules. No sex, no stealing, no smoking tobacco. Breaking rules would be punished by being sent back to your village for a week or two. Or you would have to dig bunkers, or have some cleanup duty around the camp. They advised us to watch for natural signs of danger – a snake or the way a bird sang. It was very useful. We were treated a little special and looked out for by the older soldiers. They warned us to take extra care. ...They encouraged the younger ones to stay longer in the camp and get more confidence, get more experience. The church elders, pastors, priests would come and have services in the camp.

Now I'm preoccupied with learning. In the beginning I had a lot of memories – problems from reliving my experiences. I have become a violent person, but I can control myself. I'm happy I joined the force when I did. I'm happy I'm now going back to school. It's probably better to wait till about age 20 to fight. Your mind is more clear to think through things, better able to reason. There were situations when I couldn't think what was right and wrong.

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There is no question that children's involvement in armed conflict leads to stress and psycho-social consequences. However, the impact on their daily lives and emotions differs significantly from one person to another. Many of the children interviewed spoke about the problems they have been struggling with since having taken part in combat.

The boys and girls reported problems ranging from terrifying nightmares and loss of control over their anger, to increased consumption of alcohol and difficulty concentrating. Some spoke of despair, feelings of abandonment and isolation. In nearly all cases, the boys and girls spoke of loss and feelings of sadness or loneliness for parents or family.

Many of those interviewed spoke of looking ahead, in spite of uncertainties. They spoke of their desire to return to school, to learn a profession and make a contribution to their community.

One of the challenges they face in returning home is making peace with their past and planning for the future. The voices of many of the children interviewed were full of anxiety. Some asked for help, specifically in pursuing their educational and vocational goals.

In this section we listen to how those interviewed describe the emotional and psycho-social impact of their experiences as child soldiers and tell how they are trying to cope with their transition back to civilian life.

SECTION 3

COPING WITH OUR PASTS AND LOOKING AHEAD

" I HAVE BAD DREAMS OF KILLING PEOPLE ... "

Both current and former child-combatants reported having bad dreams during combat, when dangers and threats were a real part of their everyday lives.

A number of the children continued to have nightmares long after they left the army or armed group.

Recurring nightmares revealed trauma about killing, witnessing violence and fearing retribution or stigmatization by their communities. Many described nightmares in which they were being tortured or killed.

Another common theme in recurring dreams is the loss of or separation from family members, especially parents. Young people spoke of meeting parents who had died or being separated from them and waking with pain and longing. For some, their dreams of meeting the parents and families turn to nightmares when they found their families were dead or missing.

Sometimes, about once a month, I have bad dreams of killing people. I become angry in situations when I feel I'm not good. Yes, I think of myself as violent. I drink to enjoy myself. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 17, now 25]

[When are you scared?] When I'm asleep. [Indonesia – joined when he was 16, now 17]

When I was with the militia, my friends sometimes had dreams and woke up suddenly, shocked because they were remembering the houses burning and being destroyed, as well as the people who were killed. [East Timor – joined when he was 17, now 18]

Since that time, sometimes I feel scared when I remember the past. It's horrible to remember how the militia killed my friends in front of me. [East Timor – joined when he was 13, now 18]

I'm uneasy about being a soldier. Recalling all the experiences, it gives me fear. It is haunting me. After the ceasefire, I had more trouble settling. Now I'm sleeping okay. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 7 or 8, now 18]

I had bad dreams and I woke up thinking that somebody wanted to kill me. Now I wake up still from bad dreams. I don't remember my dreams but I feel afraid when I wake up. At this time, I am still constantly afraid. Sometimes I change from feeling happy to feeling sad very quickly. The villagers here don't call me a militiaman but I am the only one who has come back. [East Timor – joined when he was 14, now 16]

Four years later, [since the end of fighting] I still have bad dreams. We have bush medicine to clear up our memories. I rub it all over my body – only elders know what's in it. I've had no counselling. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was about 15, now 23]

Sometimes I dream I go back home, sometimes I dream I am walking and sometimes I dream about a bad wizard. [Myanmar – joined when he was 10, now 11]

What I especially suffered from was missing my mother. Sometimes I dreamed I saw my mother. I tried to touch my mother in my sleep. What I thought was that in reality I don't have my mother. And I am here, away from my mother and I am in trouble, because of my fate. [Myanmar – joined when he was 16, now 17]

When I manage to sleep, I only ever have one dream. In that dream, my parents are coming to visit me. I am dressed in new clothes – not an army uniform – and my parents' eyes glow with pride as they approach me. I miss my father and mother. I try to get home for visits as often as possible, but I rarely have enough money to do so. [Cambodia – joined when he was 13, now 18]

Children who had been soldiers in one post-conflict situation reported that they had many more nightmares when they were first released and that after two or three years the nightmares subsided. Several sought traditional or ritual methods of healing and forgiveness, to help them reintegrate with their communities.

Psycho-social counselling is not widely available to former child soldiers in the East Asia and Pacific region and was mentioned only by interviewees in one situation where counselling was available.

" S O M E T I M E S N O W I G E T V E R Y A N G R Y ... "

Feelings of sudden anger and rage are a common experience among former child soldiers who have experienced combat situations.

Among the children interviewed, those from Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, spoke most openly about anger and losing control of their actions. One former child soldier said he easily "blacks out", and that during one such incident he had fired a shotgun at his sister, wounding her in the arm.

Another interviewee, who speaks very positively about his return to school, highlights the importance of having teachers and other social service providers sensitized to the experiences and needs of former child soldiers and the need for service providers to learn about appropriate response strategies.

Going back to school appears to have helped many former combatants adjust to living with their memories in a post-conflict situation.

Sometimes now I get very angry, even over small things. Sometimes it's hard to control. I still drink a lot. I might not if I hadn't been a soldier. After the fighting, my life changed. I don't feel good about myself. Yes, I think it's very hard to be normal again. Normal in my case – I get angry. I feel I can murder my enemy or who I get cross with. I want to fight with my father if there's no food for me to eat. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was about 15, now 23]

Now when I'm very cross with someone, I easily black out and when I black out I use whatever is in my hands to fight – to cause injury – without realizing what's happening. I can't listen to anyone trying to control me or tell me what to do. Afterward, it will take time to realize what I've done. There have been two instances: I shot my sister in a quarrel in the right arm. She was fighting with my father. My father was complaining that my sister did not listen to my father's advice. I just got up and shot her. She could have died. Someone pushed the gun as I fired it. Another time, a man stole some trousers and was caught. I took his hand and said, "You use these fingers to steal." And I chopped off his finger. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was about 9, now 19]

I need some continuing support, advice, counselling, someone to come and talk with me – to do away with my anger. I need support to realize that getting angry is not good, that I can adapt myself. [There are] some friends in school, some adults similar to my age [that I can talk to about this]. We talk and it helps. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 7 or 8, now 18]

My experience is not good. Especially now as I play the role as class captain. If a teacher or student does something I don't like, I go slap them. I can't hold back. I exchange words with my teacher. ...The teacher is aware of my background. When I lose my temper, the teacher understands. She takes the initiative to talk with me. She is patient. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 17, now 26]

**" I WANT TO BECOME
ONE OF THE SUCCESSFUL
PEOPLE IN LIFE ... "**

When I was fighting I never thought about being educated. Now I'm enjoying it. I want to become one of the successful people in life. I want to become a doctor. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 11, now 22]

I've changed my way of thinking now and want to complete my education. Fighting would be my second priority. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 8, now 20]

Now I'm in Grade 9. I want to go to university. I don't know what to study. I want to become something that will help my community in the future. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 11, now 18]

[He dreams of becoming a leader now, something political. The four friends he ran away with are still soldiers, he thinks. They wanted to stay fighting.] I thought that if I don't have any knowledge, I won't be able to help take back the Shan State. [Myanmar – joined when he was 10, now 15]

I want to become somebody in the Government – a politician so I can look after my country and my people. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 13, now 22]

[He lives in a refugee camp now and married a year earlier.] Once you are married, school is no longer considered. [About his dream for the future:] I don't know how to answer. [Myanmar – joined when he was 12, now 17]

Several boys and girls spoke about their future hopes and aspirations. When child soldiers return to civilian life, education often represents their greatest hope. Younger children who are demobilized find it easier to return to school and training programmes. Some boys, who were 17 or 18 or older, expressed a desire to go to school but thought it was too late for them to get an education.

These obstacles can, however, be overcome. In Bougainville, a large number of former child combatants put themselves back into school, sitting with children sometimes half their age, because they strongly desired to complete their education.

Former child soldiers often expressed ambition to help their people and communities in civilian life – as politicians, teachers, doctors or business people.

A few of the children interviewed said that they would like to stay with the armed group or army they were serving.

Some said they would continue as soldiers because they felt they were too old to go back to school and did not know what else to do. It is essential that these children are given opportunities to pursue their education or vocational training and future employment.

Some of the people interviewed spoke about what they found to be positive aspects of soldiering (access to food, the armed group paid attention to them, gave them a sense of self-worth etc) – and saw this as a reason not to demobilize or to possibly return to the ranks.

Demobilization for child soldiers who see their experience as something positive is extremely difficult, particularly in situations where fighting continues and they are pressured to stay on in the fighting ranks.

I'm in Grade 9 now. It's funny – I'm aiming to be a priest. I've nothing to give. I give my whole body to God. During the crisis, I always prayed. When praying, I've seen many miracles. I've seen it come true. I made my mind up to become a priest because God helped me when I was in danger. [For example,] I was walking from where the PNG were as a scout. One of the PNG defence soldiers shot at me and just missed. I ran away and saved myself. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was about 15, now 23]

I'm glad I became a fighter. But I won't fight any more. I've had enough. I want to continue my education. Now I'm in Grade 9. I want to help develop my village and have a small business buying and selling coca beans. [Papua New Guinea – joined when he was 11, now 23]

I have not thought about having a family as I have no time now, but one day if it is possible I will get married. I am happy that Falintil will become the new defence force for East Timor and I am ready for the new training. [East Timor – joined when he was 15, now 19]

Now I have decided to stay with Falintil in the future. I don't know what will happen in the future to the armed force, but if there are to be any changes in Falintil, for example, a change from guerrilla warfare to standard army training, then I am ready for that. [East Timor – joined when he was 17, now 19]

Sometimes others at school accuse me of being a militia and this makes me very sad – I had to stay with the militia. Sometimes I think people are talking about me and I feel very sad. I am afraid that the militia

will come back here. We want to continue our studies but sometimes it is difficult – sometimes there are people who don't like us. I think the militia leaders should go before a tribunal. [East Timor – joined when was 16, now 17]

I am still an MILF. When [the government troops] entered the camp, we left our posts. We went to the mountains and became guerrillas. We left our weapons up there in the mountains. There's a rotation – we wait for two months then it will be our turn. As soon as we receive an order...we go to the mountain. [Philippines – joined when he was 12, now 16]

I am a registered soldier – even if under false identity of an adult soldier who already died – and in theory I am eligible for the benefits promised under the demobilization programme. [Cambodia – joined when he was 13, now 17]

I won't ever neglect or abandon my sisters. Their welfare is foremost in my mind. I have learned many things here at the centre. Gardening. Construction work. And I am studying here. I now want to finish school, to have a job. I want to be a teacher. Those are things that I hope for. I realize that I can change my life. I want to lead a peaceful life.. [Philippines – joined when she was 13, now 16]

In post-conflict situations, some of those interviewed said that if fighting resumes or the promised referendum does not take place, they would again take up arms. Others said they had had enough and would never go back to fighting for any reason.

Based on the interviews, it is evident that too little has been done in the region for formal demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers. One former child soldier told how he had taken on the false identity of an adult soldier who had been killed in order to gain access to demobilization programmes.

Some children were fearful that their communities might still be angry and seek revenge for acts committed by the armed forces or groups.



Sonia is from the Ata ethnic group and joined the NPA when she was 13. When interviewed, she was 16 and living in a government welfare centre for girls, where she had been since surrendering to the military two years earlier.

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There were plenty of reasons why I wanted to join the NPA. One of them was anger from when I was 13 years old and my parents arranged for me to marry an old man. I have six brothers and sisters. I am the youngest. My father died back in Tibal-Og when I was a year old. My mother soon remarried. We all had to take care of ourselves. Mama often had miscarriages because my stepfather beat her. ...

He stopped beating Mama when he learned that I joined the NPA. I hate my stepfather.

My parents would beat me if my siblings told them I did something wrong. My parents got so angry that they hit me with a guava stick till it broke. They put me in a sack, hung the sack with me in it on a tree and then lit a fire underneath. I never ran away from the beatings, I just sat and put up with it.

Since I was a child, I wanted to be in the police or the NPA. As I grew older, my reasons changed. ... One day when we were selling the coffee beans we harvested, my stepbrother told me that there were 12 NPA members around our home. I rode for two hours on my horse to get back in time. I immediately packed my clothes. Before taking me along, the commander warned me that I might be shot and killed. I told him that if I died, they should leave me behind. I felt a little afraid but I insisted that I could handle it. It was 5 March 1998 when I left.

There were also others who cried because they missed their families. We were told to respect each other's rights – the right to say what you think and feel. You could express your opinions to anybody in the movement – even to ranking officers. You also had the right to keep silent. It applied to all – young and old people, men and women. A woman could do the same as a man. We were all equal. I liked it better when I was with the NPA than living with my parents. I had no rights or say in the decisions at home.

I believe that children joined the NPA because the circumstances that they were in presented no other choice. They shouldn't be carrying guns and fighting. It is dangerous for their bodies and their minds. Parents should be responsible for their children – they should love them and send them to school.

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CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION - CHILDREN CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE OF ADULT WARS

Through participation in armed conflicts, children have lost their childhood. This is an intolerable violation of their rights and calls for immediate action. When we listen to children tell their stories, we learn a great deal about the conditions that force or coerce them to join armed forces and groups. This understanding helps strengthen our efforts to stop the use of children in adult wars.

The voices of these children and ex-combatants present undeniable evidence of the continuing recruitment and lack of demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers in the East Asia and Pacific region. Given the enhanced international legal framework for the protection of children from involvement in armed conflicts now in force at the international level, the recruitment and active involvement of boys and girls in hostilities cannot – and must not – be allowed to continue.

Stopping the use of children in armed conflicts requires an increased understanding of conflict situations and the conditions that have led these young people to become members of military groups. Clearly, the circumstances in each country are unique. However, the stories and thoughts of the young people who took part in this study highlight some common factors and issues that can guide policy development and inform the design of effective interventions. We need to listen to their voices in order to better understand the circumstances that drive children to participate in violence – and to prevent their future involvement. The children and young people interviewed say they do not want other young people to have the same experiences. They are hoping their voices will keep other children from becoming soldiers.

The majority of situations where children were recruited as soldiers were conflicts associated with ethnic or religious differences. Many children in the region have joined armed forces or groups in order to defend their family, their home or their ethnic community. In some cases, the brutal circumstances of a conflict have left children with little or no alternative. Within some communities, social and cultural pressures and family expectations have compel children to take up arms – particularly when their home, family or way of life was under attack. At times, parents or local leaders may have "volunteered" children to serve in armed forces or groups. This was especially true in countries where conflicts span generations and are based on a minority group's struggle for survival or when conflicts are aggravated by long-standing ethnic or religious discrimination. In order to put an end to this cycle of violence and its disastrous effects on children, alternative non-violent ways must be found for boys and girls to contribute meaningfully to reconciliation and peace building within their communities.

Many young people believe the environment they left behind was a greater violator of their rights.

Whether fleeing hunger, physical and/or sexual abuse, loss of family or destruction of their community, a number of children spoke of finding refuge and support in armed forces or groups. Several boys mentioned poverty as a factor that influenced their decision to join an armed group. Some reported that fellow soldiers and officers treated them better than their own families. A number of children shared stories of concern expressed by military officers for their education. Some found a sense of power by association with an armed struggle. Awareness of child rights and child protection among communities and armed groups can influence how children are treated and can eventually contribute toward efforts to stop the use of child soldiers.

Boys and girls between the ages of 12 and 14 years face the highest risk of being recruited.

The sample represented in this study indicates that boys and girls between the ages of 12 and 14 years are at the highest risk of joining military groups. As the interviews show, 58 per cent of those who joined did so "voluntarily". This has to be understood in a context where children are not exercising free choice but are, instead, responding to economic, cultural, social and political pressures. Only 23 percent were physically coerced. Special efforts are needed to better understand the special needs of this age group and to develop appropriate alternatives and life goals to help prevent children from becoming involved with armed groups.

Child ex-combatants feel the loss of childhood, especially the opportunity for education.

Most of the young people interviewed expressed a strong desire for education. Many spoke with regret about the loss of their education when schools were destroyed or they were forced into war. An overwhelming majority expressed determination to continue their studies. The importance of education as a key component in the prevention of recruitment needs to be urgently addressed.

Not all child soldiers are boys.

Although only two of the 69 people interviewed were girls, reference was made by a number of children to the involvement of females in armed forces and groups. Girls are predominantly used as cooks, gardeners, cleaners, medics and for sexual purposes. Some girls also become "fighters" and participate in combat. There are numerous reports of sexual violence involving girls. This

abuse needs to be more systematically investigated and addressed. It is essential that actions are taken in response to the special needs of girl child soldiers.

All children suffer the psycho-social consequences of participating in armed combat.

Bad dreams and nightmares were frequently mentioned as plaguing the children both during their involvement with armed forces and groups and after their return to civilian life. The children spoke of a persistent fear of death and their memories of killing, of witnessing the violent death of family and friends and of being tortured. For some children, the nightmares recur for years. Other long-term effects include difficulty in controlling anger and violent response, alcohol or drug abuse and difficulty concentrating at school. Some say they do not like the violent person they have become. Psycho-social services – culturally adapted to the specific needs of the child – must be provided. Children should be involved in the process of demobilization, including forgiveness rituals, as appropriate, and peer counselling. A specific plan to promote education and vocational training is essential to their successful reintegration into community life.

STOPPING THE USE OF CHILDREN AS SOLDIERS – THE WAY FORWARD

- Ratify the Optional Protocol on Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict and other legal instruments relevant to the protection of children in armed conflict.
- Ensure that national laws are compatible with international legal standards.
- Provide training to military and non-state actors on child rights and protection, as well as gender sensitivity.
- Promote systematic demobilization of child soldiers in all countries and provide support for reintegration with an emphasis on access to education and vocational training.
- Build capacities for appropriate psycho-social support and response to ex-child combatants.
- Identify and promote alternative non-violent ways for boys and girls to contribute meaningfully to the cause of their people and communities.
- Develop prevention strategies to reduce the factors that make children vulnerable to "voluntary" recruitment.
- Ensure participation – where such participation can take place in safety and dignity – of children affected by armed conflict, including child soldiers, in all research, advocacy and programme planning activities.

GUIDELINES FOR CASE STUDIES

PURPOSE:

UNICEF is producing a booklet about the situation and nature of children involved in hostilities and armed conflict in the East Asia and Pacific region as part of the DFID-funded Emergency Preparedness project. The booklet will include, (1) a brief overview of the situation in the region; (2) background of the conflict in each of the selected countries where children or young people have recently been or are currently being used in either the government army or insurgent/ guerrilla armies (Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea, and the Philippines are proposed); and (3) in-depth interviews with a select number of these children. The children's stories and voices will comprise a large part of the book. The objective of the booklet and of telling the experiences of young people is to illustrate the specific nature of "child soldiers" in the EAP region, to raise awareness of their situation, and to better identify ways to help reduce or end the involvement of children in these conflicts. How children and young people perceive this possibility is important.

GUIDELINES FOR INTERVIEWS:

The following is a guideline and questionnaire for interviewing three or more young people under 18 years of age who are currently in an army, in any capacity (eg. armed combatant, courier, cook, etc). The guidelines and questions are based on a "child soldiers" research project conducted earlier by the Quaker Office for the United Nations. There are no limits to the length of the case studies.

The guideline and questionnaire are presented as a framework to provide some standardisation for the case study presentations. Conflicts in each country are different. The questionnaire has tried to take account of the different situations but it is recognised that not all questions may be relevant to a certain circumstance. Also, issues that are significant in your context may have been overlooked. Therefore, we encourage you to include additional information that you think is relevant or would assist in an outsider's understanding of the situation that involves the person interviewed.

We will also need some background information on the conflict that involves each case study person as available. Examples of this information includes,

- How long the conflict has been ongoing?
- Who does it involve?
- Ideology or reasons for the conflict
- How it ended (if it has)
- How large an area does it affect and whom within that area?
- Information about the involvement of children/young people in that particular conflict. What are the numbers in armed forces, with a breakdown of ages and sex.
- The numbers in opposition or rebel forces may be unobtainable. However, the number of children in detention for offences related to armed activity can help indicate the numbers, sex and ages of those involved.
- Include whatever partial information is available, with an explanation. And when possible, please include comparative information for adults, such as the number of girls in the army comparing with the number of women.
- Is age a criterion used for children's presence in an army or is there something else, such as height, religion?
- Numbers of child soldiers killed and injured and the types of injuries?

Some of the details mentioned in the objectives for the questions may not be answerable from the case studies, but through information you have from elsewhere. Please include this with reference to the information sources.

If a translator is needed for the interviewing, it should be somebody the interviewee can trust or who is not going to put him or her through torment again. Anecdotes and details are needed wherever possible, without making the interview itself disturbing.

Names and family details can be changed to protect anyone's safety and rights. Wherever it is safe and possible to do, a photo of the children who are or were soldiers might be used. And only if the young person and his/her family give informed consent.

IMPORTANT - Persons being interviewed and any next of kin/parents who are present need to be fully informed about what the interview and information is for and how it will be used. Also, the interviewee's name, family details and other details can be changed or kept confidential if necessary. Clearly determine what information needs to be protected. If possible, we would like to receive photos of the people being interviewed or drawings from the child/young person, but only if it is safe.

Not all questions in the questionnaire have to be asked – the interview should not be intimidating. Go with what feels best for the situation. Many of the questions will naturally lead to sub-questions that can be asked. Questions should be open-ended as much as possible to get the young person to speak for him/herself and reveal feelings – not just give short answers.

OBJECTIVE OF CASE STUDY QUESTIONS

The following is meant as an explanation to the interviewer regarding the information we are seeking from the questionnaire needed for the in-depth case studies that will be presented in the regional document.

1. Background/Context

- Describe the child's situation and background in terms of family, economic, education, etc.

2. Relationship to the Conflict

- What does the young person understand about the conflict, such as reasons for fighting, which side has the advantage.
- What personal relationship does child have with the conflict, such as

house burned, family robbed, interruption of schooling; loss of home; family or friends involved in an army; parent, sibling, friends killed in armed conflict or by soldiers, etc. (provide as many details as possible)

3. Reasons for Being In Army

- How many and which children become involved in armed forces, how they become involved, and what functions they performed initially. Does this change over time?
- How and why did the child join the armed forces/groups.
- Do economic situation and gender relate to these issues.
- Does the person being interviewed have a history of problems with justice system, with family. Had he/she run away from home? This kind of information can't always be asked directly and may require sensitive phrasing.

4. Methods of Recruitment

- Was recruitment compulsory, forced, voluntary, or induced?
- If voluntary, what were the reasons for volunteering. Are there situations where the armed groups are considered to be better off than the governmental armed forces,
- What categories of children are more vulnerable to recruitment than others. Are any categories (poor, less-educated, children separated from parents/family, certain age groups, refugees or displaced children, specific ethnic or indigenous or religious groups) targeted for recruitment and why.
- How do material benefits, ideology/religion/culture factor into the presence of young people in a military group?

5. Training

- Are the young people given any military training – informally or formally?
- Are they given much ideology, any kind of brainwashing?

6. Duties

- Do activities performed vary according to age, sex, method of recruitment, type of armed forces, duration of service?
- Are girls expected/forced/encouraged to provide sexual services. Does this vary with their age or other functions?
- These are to help as reminders of what they might have done:
 - collecting, preparing, cooking, serving food
 - cleaning quarters, digging trenches, construction, repairing roads
 - office work, messengering information
 - portering
 - doing routine patrol trips
 - medic
 - manning checkpoints
 - acting as a bodyguard
 - fighting in the front-line
 - planting landmines
 - executing suspected insurgents/spies/traitors/enemies
 - capturing villagers for porter duty and other forced labour
 - sentry duty and guarding of prisoners
 - labour on infrastructure, such as building roads
 - carrying rations
 - acting as spies or informants
 - scouting and reconnaissance
 - sex acts

7. Treatment

- Address similarities and differences between children and adults both in treatment and in the effects of their experiences. As much as possible, can the person being interviewed give a perspective on the numbers of child soldiers killed and injured and the types of injuries.
- What is the relationship between the younger soldiers with commanding officers and other soldiers?

- How much abuse occurs. Details: frequency, nature, severity.
- What is the nature of threats and intimidation?
- Are families involved in any way – cooking, caring for the wounded?
- What punishments are given for disobedience?
- Are young people subjected to toughening up procedures?
- What affects the duration of service in the army. Do the tasks they perform and the treatment they receive vary with the duration of the service.
- How would child soldiers be treated if captured? Are they treated as prisoners of war, provided special treatment, such as education; are they returned to their families, recruited into the capturing force.

8. Basic Needs

Self explanatory, though looking for details on conditions.

9. Healthcare

Self explanatory, though again, looking for a details on conditions.

10. Mental State

- What is the incidence of suicide, depression. How much is the person troubled or living with frightening or disturbing memories, and what details are possible.
- If you know of incidents, such as human wave attacks where young soldiers attack a place as if on a suicide or kamakazee mission, perhaps you can describe and ask if the child has ever seen this, been part of it and either way, ask why he thinks those people did it.

At the end of the interview, the interviewer can ask if there is anything else that the young person wants to talk about or tell, in case there is something not covered by the questions.

Thank you.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Name, or safe pseudonym:

Group:

Battalion or unit:

Rank:

A. BACKGROUND

1. How old are you and where are you from?
2. Tell us about your family? How many brothers and sisters? What jobs do they have? How old are your parents?
3. Does your family know where you are – do you have contact with them? (If not, where is your family.)
4. Did you go to school? What level/standard did you complete?
5. Would you describe the house you lived in as well as the your village (or neighborhood). How many people in your village or neighborhood? What do most people do to earn money? Are/were there any general problems for the community?
6. What would you like to do if you were not in the army?
7. What do you think about your future?

B. ABOUT THE CONFLICT

1. Who is your army fighting against and why? How long has it been going on?
2. What did your commanders tell you about them?
3. What does your family say about the conflict?

C. REASONS FOR BEING IN ARMY

1. When, how and why did you join the army? Did you become a soldier voluntarily?
2. How old were you when you joined?
3. Were you recruited from school? How?
4. How long have you been or were you with the army?
5. Was there ever fighting near your home? If so, can you describe it?
6. How close did the fighting ever get around where you live?
7. How did it make you feel then?

8. Did your family receive any benefits because you became a soldier?
9. Do you know other children/young people who also joined? Why?
10. Are there many orphans? Many girls? How are they treated and what kind of duties do they have?
10. If the person has been demobilized, what were for the reasons for demobilization?

D. TRAINING

1. Have you been given any training? If yes, describe the training you received. How long was the training?
2. Will any skills you learned be useful in civilian life?
3. Did you/do you continue with your schooling while in the army?
4. Did they teach you about the Geneva Conventions? Did you learn how to treat enemy soldiers?
5. Have you ever heard of the Convention on the Rights of the Child?
6. Do you know what human rights are? Explain, if possible.
7. Have you ever received any instruction about human rights? If so, explain.

E. DUTIES

1. What jobs have you done since joining the army?
2. Did you find any job too difficult? Explain.
3. Which job were you best at?
4. Did you ever have to fight during combat? How many times? Can you describe what happened?

F. TREATMENT

1. How do officers treat the soldiers?
2. How do older soldiers treat you?
3. Has there been anyone who was especially helpful or nice?
4. Has there been anyone who was especially hurtful or mean?
5. Were you ever beaten or tortured?
6. Are there some kinds of injuries that child soldiers receive more than adults?
7. Do more children die than adult soldiers?
8. How do you see other young soldiers coping when having killed someone or seen someone killed?

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9. Have you ever killed anyone? Would you mind to talk about what happened?
 10. Have you ever seen someone killed? Would you talk about what happened?
 11. When were you scared?
 12. In a day, how many hours are you working?
 13. When you're not working, what are you allowed to do?
 14. If you fell asleep while on a certain job or you didn't show up or you didn't do something well, how would you be treated?
 15. How often would that happen?
 16. Are there other penalties or threats that you were told about since joining the army?
 17. What would be the penalty for defecting?
 18. Have you seen other officers/soldiers being unfair or abusive toward younger soldiers? Would you describe what happened.
 19. Have you ever cried since being in the army?
 20. What would happen if an older soldier/officer saw you crying?

G. BASIC NEEDS

1. What do they feed you? Is it enough?
2. What clothing were you given at first? Has it been sufficient?
3. What shoes were you given? If they are damaged, is it easy to get another pair?
4. Where do you sleep, bathe? What are the conditions – clean, comfortable?
5. Do they provide you with toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, shampoo, etc?
6. Are you being paid? How much, how often?
7. What provisions or benefits are available if/when you are/were demobilized or leave the army?

H. HEALTHCARE

1. What are the usual illnesses/injuries?
2. Have you been sick?
3. How were treated?
4. Did you see a doctor?
5. What medicines were given to you?
6. If there were no medicines/doctor for free, could you have had it for a fee?
7. Are there any rules regarding the release of medicines, when available? Are there different medicines for different types of soldiers?
8. How were soldiers who were seriously injured on the battlefield treated?
9. If soldiers were only moderately injured, but couldn't walk, how would they be treated?

I. MENTAL STATE

1. Did the other child soldiers have bad dreams or trouble sleeping?
2. Do you have bad dreams or trouble sleeping? How often and would you describe.
3. Did other child soldiers get depressed or sad when you were in the army? Why?
4. Did you get depressed or sad when you were in the army?
5. Do you know of soldiers, especially younger ones, who have killed themselves? Why did they do it?
6. Have you ever thought of doing it? When and why?
7. Have you even been offered any drugs or alcohol before fighting?
8. Are there many soldiers who use drugs or alcohol generally? Describe what you know about the use of drugs or alcohol within the army?
9. What do you think about young people as soldiers?
10. How old do you think someone should be before he joins or is forced to be in an army?

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